



Foregrounding the Background: Music in Hitchcock's Films

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Over a fifty year career as a movie director, music was a distinctive part of the personal signature Alfred Hitchcock scrawled across his work. As several interviews throughout his career show, the role of music was of extreme importance to him as he first invented – then refined, and elaborated on – the Hitchcock thriller.

Hitchcock began his career as a graphic artist designing title cards for dialogue in silent films at the British International studios in London. Born in London's East End in 1899, Hitchcock was a Cockney and an Irish Catholic. Never a diligent student, at the age of 15 – soon after the death of his father – he dropped out of the Jesuit secondary school he attended. Later he credited the music halls and early silent cinemas for his most useful education in life. He took classes at art school and developed the graphic skills that offered him not only entrée to the film industry, but also the artisan's attention to visual detail that became a hallmark of his work. Before beginning a film Hitchcock would sketch out a set of elaborate storyboards for each shot sequence, indicating camera set-ups, set designs, and costuming. His preparation was so thorough that, late in life he told interviewers that actually shooting the film was anticlimactic to him; the real creative work came before.

Given Hitchcock's obsessive concern for visual dimensions of his films, his interest and involvement in the soundtracks of these films is easy to overlook. In an interview of 1933, however, Hitchcock comments on the role of music in film at a crucial moment in his own career and in the history of the film industry. Having just completed *Waltzes from Vienna*, essentially a filming of a successful London play on the life of Johann Strauss, Hitchcock hawks his wares to his interviewer as would any filmmaker or author on latenight TV today. Later Hitchcock would frankly admit, "To all appearances, I seemed to have gone into a creative decline in 1933 when I made *Waltzes from Vienna*, [a film] which was very bad" (Truffaut 1967). It was his one adventure into the genre of the musical. But his comments in this interview go beyond hyping a bad film – an assignment he had gladly accepted when no other more likely projects were offered to him. But it is this little credited interview that sets forth the values Hitchcock will apply to his musical soundtracks for the entirety of his career.

At the beginning of this interview, Hitchcock notes that silents were never really silent since at a minimum a piano, organ, or sometimes even an orchestra provided atmosphere in so-called silent theaters. Accompanists usually played extemporaneously, but high budget films might provide scores – excerpts from classical pieces or original compositions – to enhance the visual effects. Organs also provided sound effects, but the well equipped movie house might have a variety of patented special effects machines called variously the "Noiseograph, Dramagraph, Kinematophone, and Soundograph." One source on mid-twenties cinema lists keyboard-produced effects such as "galloping horses, railroad whistles, bells," and a rooster crowing; water pouring, falling, splashing; glasses toasting or glasses breaking, marching feet and even "blowing noses" (Fielding in Cameron 1980:4).

The non-silent "silent" provided Alfred Hitchcock's training ground as a director. Looking back in 1933 at the first years of talkies, Hitchcock

notes all that was lost from films in the industry's hasty attempt to adapt to the sound film:

"The arrival of talkies, as you know, temporarily killed action in pictures," he began, "but it did just as much damage to music. Producers and directors were obsessed by words. They forgot that one of the greatest emotional factors in the silent cinema was the musical accompaniment. They have gradually realized that action should still come first – that, talkies or not, they are still making motion pictures. But music as an artistic asset of the film is still sadly neglected." (Hitchcock quoted in Watts 1933:80).

Here Hitchcock alludes to encasement of cameras – and cameramen – in stationary, soundproof booths to muffle their sound on the set and also to the fixed placement of microphones that limited the movements of actors. Microphones often camouflaged by props within the frame precluded the use of "sizzling arc-lamps of the pre-Talkie days" that were "far too noisy with their ceaseless clatter and hissing," as one contemporary commentator notes (Scotland 1930:82). In addition, early sound could not be "mixed;" in one common early method, a single microphone on the set recorded all voices, effects, and music onto a single phonograph disc 13-16" wide, 2" thick, made of metallic soap called "wax." Reels of film were 11 minutes long, and so were the sound discs; projectionists changed reels and discs at the same time. At the editing stage of the filmmaking process, cuts could be made in the visuals to conform to the soundtrack, but not vice versa (Cameron 1980:10). In the early talkies, dialogue and music were in competition with one another; screen lovers often shouted their pledges of undying love over the twenty-piece orchestra playing out of frame (Truffaut 1983:75). To the negative, sound film's first effects were to immobilize the movie set – cameras, lights, microphones, and actors – and thus reduce the director's options for creating interest and dramatic effect on the screen. The great advantage of sound, however, was also obvious to Hitchcock:

I was greatly interested in music and films in the silent days and I have always believed that the coming of sound opened up a

great new opportunity. The accompanying music came at last entirely under the control of the people who made the picture. This was surely an advance on having a separate score played by cinema orchestras. (Quoted in Watts 1933:80).

As a director of nine silent films, Hitchcock was well aware of gains and losses with the coming of sound. By the mid thirties, Hitchcock and other directors were able to regain control of the movie set. The American industry had the greatest success developing sound equipment and the first sound film premiered October 6, 1927, with the Vitaphone sound apparatus described above and produced by Warner Brothers. *The Jazz Singer* mixed title cards with spoken dialogue. When sound came to England in 1928, Hitchcock was the director offered the chance to release Britain's first talkie. Using American sound equipment – RCA Phonophone which is similar to the Vitaphone – producers wanted Hitchcock to rework the film he had just finished shooting – *Blackmail* – to turn it into a partially sound film. In addition to including a symphonic score, a few scenes could be reshot with spoken dialogue and music generated on-camera (such as a character singing and playing the piano). According to Hitchcock, he insisted on more adaptations so that the film could be truly a sound film throughout (Truffaut 1983:64). Finally he got his way and two versions were released, one with and one without a soundtrack. The silent version was necessary because over 80% of Britain's theaters were not equipped for sound; by 1928 the percentages were reversed in America (Truffaut 1983:64). An additional problem posed by sound on this film was the heavy Polish accent of Hitchcock's female lead and his boast to Truffaut makes us wonder if he deserves credit for inventing the "lipsynch" technique used in dubbing films today. Anny Ondra who was playing an ingenue from Chelsea could barely speak English. With obvious pride at his remembered ingenuity, Hitchcock remembers: "We couldn't dub in the voices then as we do today. So I got around the difficulty by calling on an English actress, Joan Barry, who did the dialogue standing outside the frame, with her own microphone, while Miss Ondra pantomimed the words" (p.64).

Blackmail was an instant hit, both in the few sound-equipped theaters and on the silent film circuit. In one scene, music presents an ironic contrast to appearances; a vagrant who is blackmailing the young heroine forces her to give him a meal. As he eats, he whistles, "The best things in life are free," much to the chagrin of the heroine. But the phrase "hit movie" of 1929 is bitterly oxymoronic. The world-wide economic disaster of 1929 had its effect on the film industry, slowing down the conversion of theaters, limiting the availability of sound recording equipment, and even retarding implementation of improvements in various systems.

It would be almost a decade before technology advanced enough so that the three features of a soundtrack – dialogue, sound effects, and music – could be used to enhance the cinematic images, not overwhelm them. Personally the first few years of the sound era constituted what Hitchcock himself called "the lowest ebb" of his career (Truffaut 1983:77). His fortunes changed with the first of his five important musical collaborations over the next forty years. Louis Levy made five suspense films with Hitchcock –from *The 39 Steps* (1935) through *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). The thematic use of sound is particularly striking in the first of these films. The main character whistles a simple music hall tune throughout the film, unaware of where he first heard it. The last scene brings characters back to the music hall where an orchestra is blaring the now-familiar strain at the climactic moment of the film.

In *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Sound Track*, Elisabeth Weis writes of the soundtracks of all Hitchcock's major films and notes that his early preference was for using source sound, not off-screen music to build audience reaction because the director had more control (Weis 1982:30). Hitchcock's 1933 interview shows the important role he saw for the off-screen musical score, in Weis' view, but also shows the "personal ambivalence" (p.90) the director felt in these years about any obtrusive manipulation of the realistic situation, either visual or aural.

Writing of Hitchcock's first, silent-era thriller, *The Lodger* (1926), William Rothmann notes that the philosophical underpinnings of this new genre and the visual effects that communicate this world view to an audience were already fully developed:

Hitchcock did not gradually "find himself" ... Rather, at the outset of his career, he announced his central concerns and declared a position ... to which he remained faithful for over fifty-five years. *The Lodger* is not an apprentice work ... Thematically and stylistically, it is fully characteristic of his filmic writing. By "writing" I mean not what we ordinarily think of as a script but a film's construction as a succession of views, what is technically called its "continuity" ... (1982:7).

Hitchcock's undervalued interview of 1933 with Stephen Watts suggests that his concepts of the role of music, too, were fully in place with his first sound films.

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The Films of Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)

- 1926 *The Pleasure Garden, The Mountain Eagle, The Lodger* (his first thriller)
- 1927 *Downhill, Easy virtue, The Ring*
- 1928 *The Farmer's Wife, Champagne*
- 1929 *The Manxman, Blackmail* (Britain's first talking picture)
- 1930 *Juno and the Paycock, Murder!*
- 1931 *The Skin Game*

- 1932 *Rich and Strange, Number Seventeen*
- 1933 *Waltzes from Vienna* (his only musical)
- 1934 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (first version)
- 1935 *The 39 Steps*
- 1936 *Sabotage, Secret Agent*
- 1937 *Young and Innocent*
- 1938 *The Lady Vanishes*
- 1939 *Jamaica Inn* (moves permanently to the United States)
- 1940 *Rebecca* (wins Best Picture Oscar)
Foreign Correspondent
- 1941 *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (his only American comedy)
Suspicion (Joan Fontaine wins Best Actress Oscar)
- 1942 *Saboteur*
- 1943 *Shadow of a Doubt*
- 1944 *Lifeboat*
- 1945 *Spellbound*
- 1946 *Notorious*
- 1947 *The Paradise Case*
- 1948 *Rope* (his first film in color)
- 1949 *Under Capricorn*
- 1950 *Stage Fright*
- 1951 *Strangers on a Train*
- 1953 *I Confess*
- 1954 *Dial M for Murder* (original in 3-D)
Rear Window
- 1955 *The Trouble With Harry*
To Catch a Thief; begins 10-year television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*
- 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (second version)

- 1957 *The Wrong Man*
1958 *Vertigo*
1959 *North by Northwest*
1960 *Psycho*
1963 *The Birds*
1964 *Marnie*
1966 *Torn Curtain*
1969 *Topaz*
1972 *Frenzy*
1976 *Family Plot*