

# HITCHCOCK ON FILM MUSIC AND BERNARD HERRMANN

*Transcription of a (tape-recorded) conversation with Adriano*



Adriano with Alfred Hitchcock (Zürich, Hotel Baur au Lac, September 26, 1972).

*On the morning of September 26, 1972, a press screening of Alfred Hitchcock's new film Frenzy was scheduled in Zürich, Switzerland, to be followed by a press conference at the City Town Hall. Having learned of this beforehand, I wrote to Hitchcock asking if I might interview him about his views on music for his films, and specifically about Bernard Herrmann, on whom I was planning to make a radio feature. I was contacted by phone and in Zürich, after the conference, was approached by an English agent, who inquired if I might meet the director in the afternoon at the Baur au Lac Hotel for tea.*

*Frenzy was not really appreciated by the press. At the conference apéritif I learned from many journalists that the film was considered weak and "too strange" or "too untypical." But I liked this feature from the beginning since, although being Swiss, I understood and cultivated the British sense of humor. I say immodestly that I seemed the only one at the press conference asking intelligent questions about Frenzy, and was surprised when the journalists quoted my questions in their articles as if they had asked them. After having answered a question, Hitchcock immediately looked back at me, waiting for the next one, since he knew that it would be interesting and in clear English.*

*A painful detail comes to my mind. Our Swiss Mayor had written an open letter to Hitchcock, thanking him for his visit to Zürich. The letter, in English, contained some 10 spelling and grammatical mistakes! This prompted me to write a furious reader's comment to the newspaper which had published it.*

*When I met Hitchcock at the Hotel, I became aware of the sound of birds coming into the room from an open window and could not help but think of *The Birds* as we talked, while his wife Alma waited quietly in an adjacent bedroom. My photographer friend Hans-Peter Brendler took twenty-five shots of our meeting, a few of which are featured here. After our interview Hitchcock very kindly complimented me saying that he never thought he would be meeting a young man in Switzerland who knew so much about his films! Once back to the studios, he was kind enough to send me original posters of *Psycho*, *The Birds* and *Marnie* and a bunch of promotional stills from various films.*

*I would never imagine that 20 years later I would pay homage to Hitchcock by recording – as a conductor – a new performance of Franz Waxman's score for *Rebecca*. As far as Herrmann is concerned, the German Swiss Radio station cancelled my project, which seemed to be too obscure anyway. It had been conceived for a maximum duration of an hour. I had to wait until 2002 to be warmly welcomed by the Swiss French Radio to realize a portrait of Herrmann in three parts, each of which lasted two hours! On the same station I had realized 3 years before a 6-hours cycle on the history of film music. My recording of Herrmann's score for *Jane Eyre* was done in 1994.*

ADRIANO: As far as your pictures and their soundtracks are concerned, do tell us something about the problems you get involved in. Is a composer, after having been asked to score a film, obliged to give you from the beginning a specimen of the music he is going to write?

HITCHCOCK: I'll tell you the big problem with music. In a way you have no control for music for this reason: You say to a musician, "Can you give me perhaps some idea of what you are going to do?" and he says, "No, that's impossible!" You say "Something on the piano?" He says, "You need the *Orchester*" and all that, you see? So you say "Oh, well!"

A: I see, you approve the fragmentary piano reduction, taking a certain risk, until the orchestration is done. What happens next?

H: Now, when they start to record music, like Tiomkin would say to me, "Come down, we're going to start to score the picture. I want your opinion." So I go down, I hear the first scene. I say, "I don't like it." He says "Oh, you can't change it now! It's all been orchestrated!" So there's no way of correcting it. Now when Benny Herrmann started on *Torn Curtain*, I went down, heard the first segment – I said, "Finished. No other way. Finished. Goodbye. Here's your money. Sorry."

A: After this, Benny Herrmann's services were no longer required by you. Already in *Marnie* I had the impression that he was repeating himself – or was his imagination at momentary low ebb?

H: Repeating, but the point is that he's a musician! Then we had the same problem – I won't name names, but we had a big, well-known musician on *Frenzy* – I went down to the podium and I said "I am afraid this music is very heavy!" He said "Well, it's a murder film!" I said, "Yes, but it's my murder film! It's not an ordinary murder film!" He said, "Well, I see what I can do." Well, he finished the score. Impossible! It was heavy. I said "You slow this picture up; all the tempo of the picture would be gone". And he didn't have enough imagination to even – to use the musical term – give it counterpoint. You know, you can have if you get the right setting, a man come in a room and murder a woman and have somebody across the road playing the piano, playing pop music, which is even more dramatic, to hear this giggly music playing. So there is room for contrapuntal - counterpoint music.

A: This reminds me of the first scene in Menotti's opera *The Consul*, where we hear a record from a music-box in the background while the hero rushes on the stage, wounded. And this is very dramatic, the more so as it takes the place of an overture. It is well known that Herrmann's seven Hitchcock soundtracks, particularly of *Psycho* and *Vertigo*, are among the finest examples of excellent collaboration between a director and a composer.

H: He is a very good composer, but he's a very difficult man.

A: Which is the Herrmann soundtrack you prefer?

H: *The Trouble with Harry*, because that was comic.

A: I actually expected you to prefer *Psycho*, as this one has been classified amongst the best soundtracks ever produced.

H: We had in *Psycho* every time a murder nearly took place, screaming violins. Let me tell you how composers work: When we got to the end of the picture, the man rushes in with a knife – Tony Perkins – no screaming violins! I said "What happened? We had screaming violins in the first two murders and in the last one nothing." "Oh, well," he said, "We did the last one first, the other two came later." I said "You're crazy! Re-do the end one and make them all the same!" That's musicians for you!

A: And didn't Benny score *Psycho* for strings alone, since the picture was in black and white?

H: I did it in black and white because I didn't want to show the blood.

A: When you are working on a new script, do you often imagine a certain scene with the musical background?

H: Not very closely. Too busy with the writer!

A: In *The Birds*, Herrmann was consultant for the electronic sound. Those effects were especially thrilling and holding the tension at high pitch.

H: Every bit a sound, sound of birds, everything! Nothing from an *Orchester*, nothing from bird noise, all electronic. We went to West Berlin, they have a machine there, it's a big machine, they play and give you any sound in the world. That's the way it was done.

A: And what was Benny's job?

H: His job was to listen to the electronic sound.

A: After *Trouble with Harry* you asked him to score *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, a picture which contained music by other composers, too, such as for Doris Day's songs and for the *Storm Cloud Cantata* in the Albert Hall sequence, where Benny appears as a conductor.

H: Well, I use the same music that I did for the English version, written by a man called Arthur Benjamin.

A: You have a remarkably good memory and an admirable knowledge of music and its appropriate application in different scenes of a film.

H: I am very interested in music myself and I suppose these things come not exactly by accident, but by instinct. But sometimes I feel that in a film, music is good when you stop it and you have silence. Then it's more dramatic.

A: After having seen *Frenzy* this morning, I am able to recollect a few sequences where this same idea of yours has reached its perfect fulfillment. Well, that is all I wanted to have on tape. I will send you the script of my transcription as requested, but before it will be finished I may have to ask you for more information in the future.

H: Yes, all right. Keep in touch. Thank you.

*Note: Hitchcock uses the term "Orchester" in its German translation intentionally.*

*(edited by William H. Rosar)*

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Photograph of Alfred Hitchcock inscribed to Adriano



Alfred Hitchcock, Zürich, September 26, 1972 - Photos by Hans-Peter Brendler © 1972/2013 Adriano Productions



Adriano's "Psycho"-self-portrait (Zürich, Sept. 12, 2013)



The original poster (which Hitchcock had sent me after our interview) is the earlier version, from which the picture of Antony Perkins with a knife was subsequently eliminated.