

# Notes on the Program

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## Psycho

### Bernard Herrmann

Alfred Hitchcock is everywhere acknowledged as a supreme master of cinematic suspense, but he could just as easily be applauded as one of the film directors most cannily attuned to how music could enhance the moods he sought to convey. This might extend even to being open to persuasion, which was not a characteristic commonly associated with this famously stubborn figure. Still, when Hitchcock viewed the provisional final cut of *Psycho*, he felt the film was not successful. He thought he might trim it down to an hour-long television show, but Bernard Herrmann, who had contracted to write the score, convinced the director to let him proceed with the composition and see if the addition of music would change his mind. “Well, do what you like,” Hitchcock responded, “but only one thing I ask of you: please write nothing for the murder in the shower. That must be without music.”

Herrmann wrote the score, including the shrieking strings in the shower scene, which he set aside. With the rest of the music attached to the film, Hitchcock felt more positive about *Psycho* — except for the shower scene, which still struck him as hollow. Herrmann recounted:

Then I said, “I really do have something composed for it, and now that you’ve seen it your way, let’s try mine.” We played him my version of the music. He said, “Of course, that’s the one we’ll use.” I said, “But you requested that we not add any music.” “Improper suggestion, my boy, improper suggestion,” he replied.

*Psycho* was the sixth Hitchcock film for which the notoriously temperamental Herrmann would provide the score. Most directors employed him for just one film, a



Janet Leigh as Marion Crane, in the shower scream heard 'round the world

## In Short

**Born:** June 29, 1911, in New York City

**Died:** December 24, 1975, in Los Angeles, California

**Work composed:** January and February 1960

**World premiere:** The film was premiered June 16, 1960, in New York City.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the New York Premiere of the score performed live to the complete film

**Estimated duration:** ca. 109 minutes

handful survived two, and only Henry King collaborated with him on three. “Mr. Hitchcock had a wonderful relationship with Bennie,” reported *Psycho*’s script supervisor Marshall Schlom, using Herrmann’s nickname. “And the way to maintain that was to give Herrmann the latitude to do what he wanted.” Hitchcock made Herrmann an indispensable part of his team for a string of classics: *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963, an electronically manipulated soundscape rather than a traditional instrumental score), *Marnie* (1964), and *Torn Curtain* (1966).

His score for the last of these was not used in the film: Hitchcock wanted a jazz-pop score, Herrmann insisted on a more classical orchestral sound, and over that difference of opinion the two parted company forever.

Herrmann was New York born and bred, a graduate of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York University, and The Juilliard School. In 1931 he formed his own ensemble, the New Chamber Orchestra, to explore avant-garde repertoire, and in 1934 he joined the staff of CBS as an arranger and rehearsal conductor. In 1940 he was appointed chief conductor of the CBS Symphony Orchestra. He also contributed original music to CBS productions, and his scores for Orson

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## Strings Only, Please

The music for this week’s Art of the Score screenings could hardly be more different. John Williams’s score for the previous presentation, Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, calls for a large symphony orchestra of strings, woodwinds, brass, keyboards, and percussion (including no fewer than 34 different percussion instruments, each adding a distinct color), plus a chorus. Herrmann’s music for *Psycho* employs only strings. It was an unusual choice for a film score, and while Herrmann was no stranger to full symphonic orchestration, he decided to streamline his resources or, as he put it, “to complement the back-and-white photography of the film with a black-and-white score.” And yet, the string instruments are capable of a tremendous array of sound — to such memorably, iconic effect that it may take audience members a moment to realize that more types of instruments are not being deployed. Film composer and scholar Fred Steiner observed:



“Mother” appears, to the screech of strings

Just as the “no color” images of a black and white film are able to convey all the emotions and visual effects the director wishes to express, so the string orchestra has the capability — within the limits of its one basic color — to produce an enormous range of expression and a great variety of dramatic and emotional effects, with all the gradation in between.

Welles's radio shows led to an invitation to write the music for two of that director's films, *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942).

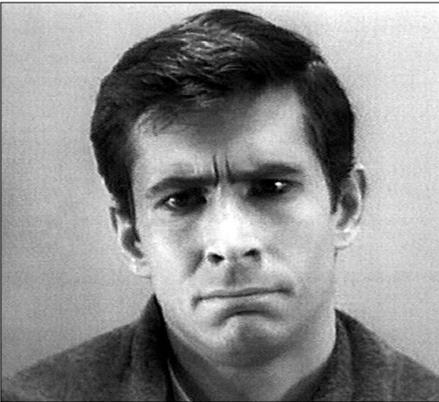
With such successes under his belt Herrmann was eagerly sought out by the Hollywood elite to provide what would become a 35-year stream of music for film and television productions. His oeuvre is filled with cinematic masterpieces, from the first, *Citizen Kane*, to the last, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1975). Herrmann died the night he finished recording the music for *Taxi Driver*, and Scorsese dedicated the film to his

memory. In total, Herrmann composed the scores for 51 films, not to mention a good many radio productions, television shows, concert works, and even an opera, *Wuthering Heights*. In fact, the wide-ranging, rising-then-falling, three-note motif that Herrmann called the fundamental musical theme of *Psycho*, first heard when Marion suggests that Norman put his mother in a home, traces its ancestry to one of those concert pieces, Herrmann's Sinfonietta for Strings of 1935.

**Instrumentation:** string orchestra.

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## Psycho-logical Breakthroughs



Anthony Perkins as Norman Bates, leaving an indelible impression

murder, with an unforgettable musical motif to match, *Psycho* set a horror standard for generations to come; the mantle of “scream queen” was carried on by star Janet Leigh's real-life daughter, Jamie Lee Curtis, in her first starring role, in *Halloween* (1978).

**First flush** — *Psycho*'s frank depiction of sexual situations and erotic psychological tension were unusual for American films of the time, and it made studio executives nervous, perhaps so much so that they let slip its depiction of a toilet being flushed (a first in US cinema).

Just as Hitchcock's film placed the term “psycho” in the mainstream and kept a skittish public out of the shower, the film's release in 1960 was groundbreaking in some other ways:

**First spoiler alert** — Hitchcock did not allow critics to screen the film in advance and, in a move that was particularly controversial to theater operators, insisted on a “no late admission” policy. At the time, films were screened continuously throughout the day and moviegoers were accustomed to being able to enter whenever they wished and stay as long as they liked.

**First slasher film** — In its depiction of violent murder, with an unforgettable musical motif to match, *Psycho* set a horror standard for generations to come; the mantle of “scream queen” was carried on by star Janet Leigh's real-life daughter, Jamie Lee Curtis, in her first starring role, in *Halloween* (1978).

— The Editors