

'It's a reference whenever you want to build tension': How Psycho's terrifying music changed film forever

Alfred Hitchcock's grisly horror, which turns 65 this month, might not have become known as an all-time classic without the crucial addition of Bernard Herrmann's disturbing score. Screaming violas that sound like they're coming out of an abattoir. Thumping bass notes, which slowly decrease in speed and seem to imitate a victim's faltering heartbeat. Take away composer Bernard Herrmann's score for director Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which turns 65 this month, and it's fair to say this 1960 horror film wouldn't have the same nerve-shredding impact.

Particularly key is the knives-edge music that plays when blonde bombshell Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), not long after checking in to the Bates Motel, is attacked through a shower curtain by a shadowy killer. "That music is everything," says Rachel Zeffira, a film composer and one half of art-folk duo Cat's Eyes. "It's the birds, it's the bees, and it's the voices in the back of your head."

"*Psycho* was certainly not a bad film before it was scored, but it lacked tension," explains Steven C Smith, the author of a new book, *Hitchcock and Herrmann: The Friendship and Film Scores that Changed Cinema*. Herrmann proceeded to give the film a much-needed jolt by writing music for an all-string 50-person orchestra that marked a "return to pure ice water", as the composer described it to *Sight and Sound*.

Herrmann forced an initially dismissive Hitchcock to watch the shower sequence both with and without his jump-scare music. "Oh yes, we must use it!" Hitchcock concurred. "But I thought you didn't want my music here?" Herrmann sarcastically replied, before the director scoffed: "My boy, improper suggestion."

It's an anecdote that reflects the pair's fiery partnership. Their creative union consistently resulted in film scores that make the viewer feel like they are caught up in a character's murky inner dialogue, privy to both their most romantic dreams and most hopeless nightmares (see *Vertigo*). Zeffira describes the music that plays as being "dejected and anxious", which she says "makes you feel sorrow for a killer. I know before writing film music, Herrmann would always read the novel a movie was based on and study the literature, so his score was more empathetic. Every note Herrmann played had meaning".

By 1960, Herrmann was a giant in the film business; what's more, he and Hitchcock had already made five landmark films together (*The Trouble with Harry*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, and *North By Northwest*) and developed a seamless chemistry. Still, Smith believes *Psycho* was a production where Herrmann re-energised a weary director. "Hitch feared that he had made a mistake filming such gruesome material – something many advised him not to do," explains Smith. "But Herrmann made Hitchcock fall in love with the project once again. Herrmann later said he wrote *Psycho*'s

score for an all-strings orchestra to create 'a black-and-white sound' to complement the black-and-white photography."

Aside from helping turn Psycho into a massive hit for Hitchcock (grossing \$32m against a budget of \$800k), Herrmann saw his score create ripples throughout popular culture in many other unexpected ways. Producer George Martin based his wounded 1966 string arrangement for The Beatles' Eleanor Rigby on Herrmann's Psycho music. "George wanted to bring some of that drama into the arrangement," Paul McCartney once explained to the BBC.