

A PORTRAIT OF HITCH: *THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY*

Although Lyn Murray delivered a zestful score for *To Catch a Thief*, his most significant contribution was recommending Bernard Herrmann as the composer for Hitchcock's next comedy, *The Trouble with Harry*. Murray, who was unavailable for the project, guessed that the two would work well together, and he was right; what he didn't know was that they would team up for more than a decade to become the most brilliant director-composer collaboration of the era—indeed, the most celebrated in the history of cinema.

The personal and artistic bond between the two men was deep and complex. Hitchcock, a Catholic Cockney, and Herrmann, a Russian Jew, were both stubbornly independent outsiders who abhorred mediocrity and spurned the establishment even as they sought its approval; neither artist ever received an Academy Award, yet both craved respect and recognition. According to Steven Smith, Herrmann's biographer, "Both men desired social mobility, Hitchcock aspiring to join the English upper class, Herrmann seeking a place among top rank conductors in his own country and abroad." The temperaments of the two were opposite—Herrmann infamously raw and explosive, Hitchcock cool and detached—yet that seems to have benefited their collaboration. Herrmann's passion was "the perfect complement to Hitchcock's often detached images," writes Smith, "giving them an emotional center and reinforcing thematic purpose." The two were "destined to come together," states Royal S. Brown, "because of the age-old principle 'opposites attract.' ... [Hitchcock] was forever the calm, rational being, the very prototype of British unflappability. At the opposite extreme, the American-born, Jewish Herrmann was possessed of an almost legendary irascibility.... Herrmann's musical translations of raw effect seemed to be waiting for the counterbalancing effect of a Hitchcock-style cinema, with its carefully elaborated visual structures." Beneath the counterbalancing personae was a deep emotional correspondence. The two shared "a dark, tragic sense of life," says Donald Spoto, "a brooding view of human relationships, and a compulsion to explore aesthetically the private world of the romantic fantasy."³

Spoto recently reminded me that there were also practical reasons for the collaboration, and that luck played a role as well. A "distinctly commercial purpose" lurked behind Hitchcock's hiring of Herrmann and, indeed, Waxman as well. These were "the very best in the business during the golden age," and Hitchcock knew it. In a happy accident, Herrmann became available at the moment Hitchcock became his own producer: "Remember that Hitchcock had no choice of composer until he also produced his films—and even then he had mostly to use studio personnel. His clout enabled him to have Herrmann, who was not attached to a studio in any case."⁴

In *The Trouble with Harry*, Hitchcock got not only his first but his favorite Herrmann score, and Herrmann got something he had always wanted, the opportunity to write a comedy. The two hit it off so well and Hitchcock admired the score so unreservedly that Herrmann quickly became a friend of Hitchcock's family, partaking of Alma's cooking and helping Hitchcock wash dishes. According to Norma Shepherd, Herrmann's third wife, these occasions gave the two men an opportunity to share their aspirations and mordant humor: "They'd talk about what they would do if they weren't in the film business. Benny wanted to run an English pub until someone told him you actually had to open and close at certain hours. Benny asked Hitch what he would be. There was a silence. Hitchcock then turned to Benny, his apron folded on his head, and said solemnly, 'A hanging judge.'"⁵

The Trouble with Harry created a bond between the two men that went far beyond kitchen banter. Their mutual trust resulted in Hitchcock's inviting Herrmann to the set before shooting, asking in advance which scenes should have music and altering their timing accordingly. The continuity of the collaboration reinforced future successes, for Herrmann craved dependability in a business that he viewed, like life itself, as chaotic and treacherous. Indeed, he responded positively to Hitchcock because of his staying power, praising the director for making one distinguished film after another since the silent era. The good feelings even allowed Herrmann to sometimes ignore Hitchcock's instructions and get away with it—at least until their final confrontation.

Despite the importance of the *Harry* music, it is far less celebrated than that composed for *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, or *Psycho*, even though it is as original and inventive as any of these. Here is another instance of Hitchcock's easy label as the master of suspense causing false expectations. For this slow-motion comedy, almost entirely bereft of suspense, Herrmann created the most genial of his Hitchcock works, perhaps the most tuneful of all his cinematic scores, the kind that often becomes a hit on its own as a recording.



Bernard Herrmann asleep on the job.

That it never has says a great deal about the movie's reception. *The Trouble with Harry* was simply too bizarre for the American public, which was not accustomed to its alienating style of black comedy. A corpse pops up in a gorgeous Vermont woods, puzzling the little boy who discovers it, then throwing into chaos the pastoral, genteel adults, including the unlikely romantic couple, Sam Marlowe and Jennifer Rogers, played by John Forsythe and Shirley MacLaine (in her film debut); the body is then rediscovered by the boy and buried by the proper authorities one more time so that order can be restored and the couples coupled.

Because this is comedy, chaos is only temporary: everyone treats Harry's corpse as a vulgar nuisance that must be continually dug up and re-buried. The cool detachment of Hitchcock's characters is carried to such a deliberately ludicrous extreme that the tone veers way beyond normal deadpan. American audiences didn't get the joke, though

the film, like *I Confess* and other audacious Hitchcock flops, was a hit in Paris. Even in the DVD era, *The Trouble with Harry* has received scant attention, despite its provocative idea and its luscious cinematography and score. Hitchcock and his fans blame its failure on its “English humor,” but Americans always loved *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes*. The humor in *Harry* is actually something less parochial and more original, closer to theater of the absurd than anything specifically English. Here again Hitchcock’s Old World sophistication interacts with a Hollywood cast and a New World setting—in this case, a pristine New England that doesn’t remotely resemble Britain—to produce something daring and unclassifiable. Only the score sounds English (in part like Elgar, whom Herrmann admired), but its lyricism is another layer of irony in the narrative.

The music does have its admirers. Royal S. Brown sees the tight four-note motif opening the film as the genesis of Herrmann-Hitchcock, a paradigm of the recurring statement Herrmann would continually use to bolt together the pieces of what David Selznick called Hitchcock’s “jigsaw cutting.” Spoto regards the score as nothing less than an exorcism of sex and death, “as fresh and hummable as a country tune. Like the gorgeous color, it urges an exorcism of precisely the fear and trembling that surround the two traditional American obscenities.... Sex and death are thus accepted like the seasons.”⁵ Freshness and hummability are not often associated with Herrmann, but in Spoto’s reading they brighten what Puritanical Americans view as dark, a reversal of the usual Hitchcockian pattern of having music reveal concealed darkness within something deceptively cheery.

At the very beginning, in the captivating main title, Herrmann sets the ominous-merry mood: an imperious woodwind motif is contradicted by an impish tune; banal oompahs compete with somber ostinatos, the kind later used in *North by Northwest*, another comedy full of double moods and entendres. The duplicity continues through the main title into the discovery scene, where to ravishingly lyrical music, the boy discovers the body. Here, in its purest form, is Hitchcock counterpoint, the score contradicting what is on the screen. The double mood became the director’s signature: Gounod’s “Funeral March of a Marionette,” his choice for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* a year after *Harry* appeared in theaters, again projected jocularly with a hint of the sinister. *Harry* is a sonic version of the persona he presented in interviews, television introductions, and trailers.

Herrmann’s lyricism is everywhere: in the bucolic woodwind tune during the discovery of the corpse, the beautiful horn theme during the scene displaying Sam Marlowe’s paintings, and the Romantic idea floating through the finger-teacup and art-sale scenes. Equally engaging are a series of mock-formal waltzes (a form always welcomed by Hitchcock) and a courtship melody for Captain Wiles and Miss Gravely during their genial argument over who hit Harry on the head, who finished him off, and who had the right to dig him up again. At the end, Sam proposes to Jennifer with a love melody that, in its passionate longing, prefigures *Vertigo*, and all the themes suddenly come together in a comedic coda. This is elegant stuff for an offbeat comedy, as is Robert Burks’s painterly photography, shimmering against the corpse-as-nuisance storyline. To remind us that this is supposed to be funny, Herrmann delivers merrily tooting woodwinds—but these take on a bizarre quirkiness since they play during the endless burying and reburying of poor Harry, the central character, who has the bad taste to be dead.

In his introductory scene, Forsythe’s Sam sings “Flaggin’ the Train to Tuscaloosa,” a ballade with lyrics by Mack David and music by Raymond Scott. Captured in a long shot, Sam belts this tune as he approaches the camera, his voice soaring over the pastoral countryside and a montage of the film’s eccentric characters, gradually drifting into vocalise colored by church chimes. It’s a lovely moment, a prelude to the film’s ensuing drama of disappearing love mates (“Gotta get back to Tuscaloosa, back to the girl I left behind”) and a commentary on Hitchcock’s love of trains (“Oh, do I love that choo-choo sound”). Defying realism, Hitchcock again embraced opera.

So quintessentially Hitchcockian is this music that Herrmann converted it into a charming suite, “A Portrait of Hitch.” Dedicated to the director, the suite is a deft specimen of musical portraiture capturing Hitchcock’s mischievous personality. This was apparently the way Herrmann viewed Hitchcock, as jokester and fun to be around, not as the cold authoritarian with whom he later struggled for control. Hitchcock was so benignly engaged with this project—he always maintained it was one of his favorites—that others on the set experienced him this way as well. John Forsythe called him a “glorious guy” with a “wonderful sense of humor.”⁷ If the humor was a little weird, no one seemed to mind.

The Trouble with Harry was indeed a portrait of its director, just as Herrmann envisioned. Breaking one of his cardinal rules, Hitchcock made it for himself, not for his audience, calling its half-million-dollar box office loss “an expensive self-indulgence.” He was especially fond of the high contrast between the grotesque and the humorous, which elevated, he said, “the commonplace in life to a higher level.”⁸

The score, full of exposed solos, requires delicate playing. Herrmann was not happy with the performance of Paramount’s orchestra, especially the oboist, whom he berated for sloppiness. This was the beginning of the turbulent Herrmann-Hitch collaboration: the composer and director clicked marvelously on this project, but Herrmann’s bitter fights with the oboe player were a warm-up for his quarrels with others, ultimately with Hitchcock.

himself.

One reason the rift did not happen sooner is that Herrmann's infamous tantrums were usually directed at those he felt were frauds or incompetents; he had enormous professional respect for Hitchcock, a feeling amply returned when the latter stood up for him against criticism from studio heads.

As Steven Smith points out, *The Trouble with Harry* was "Hitchcock's favorite Herrmann score for him. He thought Herrmann had done a superb job capturing the macabre humor in this subject. He knew how important music would be in carrying the delicate tone of this unusual film." This comment illustrates again that Hitchcock's music carries the film rather than accompanying it. "Herrmann knew exactly what Hitchcock was trying to achieve," Smith concludes. "He didn't just decorate the film with his music." For Hitchcock, music was never decoration, but a central part of the design.⁹

Five years later, again with Herrmann's music, he would attain the summit of comedy in *North by Northwest*, again mixing wit with mayhem, but also with suspense, sexual titillation, chases, and everything else audiences had come to love in his work. *Harry*'s failure compared to this success parallels a contrast twenty years earlier between *Rich and Strange* and *The 39 Steps*, the former a strangely static but brazenly original black comedy, the latter an audience-friendly comedy-suspenser, both rich in innovative music.