



Analysis on musical scores and their impacts in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

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1. Introduction

In films, the mood in each intricate scene is shaped not only by its plot and characters, but also by the coordination of visual and auditory components, such as lighting, camera angles, color, and, particularly, music. In particular, the musical score the director chooses to implement in their movies can significantly shape audience perception, helping to reflect more deeply into a character's inner psychology, foreshadow events, or complicate the storyline. This is particularly inherent in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, where one must consider how Hitchcock uses Bernard Herrmann's music to externalize the emotional collapse of his protagonist. In *Vertigo*, musical scores by Herrmann function not only as background accompaniment but also as a psychologically evocative device. Through the intensity of the opening sequence, the mournful leitmotif of Carlotta Valdes, the dreamlike atmosphere mirroring Scottie's mental decline, and the climactic tension of Judy's revealing of the truth, Herrmann's compositions - shaped by Hitchcock's deliberate placement in specific scenes - highlight the film's themes of obsession and longing, identity, and the spiraling consequences of madness and death.

2. Soundtracking Scottie's obsessive spiral

Hitchcock implements Herrmann's score to first expose the obsessive longing that drives Scottie's tragic pursuit of what he believes to be Madeline, but is actually an illusion. Through Hitchcock's alignment of visuals and audio, the music acts as an entry for the audience to access and examine Scottie's interior and most raw emotions. His psychological spiral is portrayed initially with "Carlotta's Portrait," a piece based off of a *mysterioso* and the alluring Castilian rhythms of the *habanera*. The theme's endless, unresolved loop lures Scottie into a trance that gradually evolves into obsessive longing; such repetitiveness of the tune can be likened to the cyclical nature of obsession, eventually becoming inescapable and emotionally destabilizing. In later cues of "Goodnight and The Park," Herrmann further deepens this rift between Scottie and Judy by inserting a sorrowful rendering of the *valser romantico* during their dinner together that gives way to the Love Theme, both remaining unresolved and suggesting that their romantic connection will never be fulfilled. In the following park scene, a new waltz emerges, but similarly to the previous Valse it never fully comes to a finale. Such musical choices emphasize how Judy's love is overshadowed by Scottie's endless desire for an illusionary woman who no longer exists. Another emotionally provocative example can be found with the theme of "Scène d'amour," which plays when Judy agrees to transform herself back into Madeline. As Scottie waits, quivering strings grow the intensity of the scene, reflecting his desperation; upon Judy's return, the music reaches a strong crescendo, however the scene is marked with more of an eerie finality rather than the triumph one would expect for Judy's success in winning Scottie's heart. Herrmann modeled this piece after one of his favourite pieces - Wagner's "Liebestod", meaning "love-death" - and made it his own by incorporating the same romanticism interplaying with death. Considering how the theme also ends up without

resolution, it implies that Scottie's passion towards Judy is unsustainable and fated to collapse. This theme of fatal longing reaches its climax in "The Necklace, The Return and Finale," played when Scottie discovers Judy's lie through her wearing a necklace that had once belonged to Madeline, and previously Carlotta. Herrmann reintroduces the Habanera and Mystery Theme to depict his betrayal, and a more "broken" version of the valser romantico as they ascend the tower once again. The Death Chord overshadows the scene, reflecting how Scottie's longing grows in destructive power, turning love into obsession and eventually tragedy.

3. Herrmann's Score and the Illusion of Identity

Hitchcock also uses Herrmann's music to reinforce the theme of fractured identity, particularly in scenes that reveal Judy's double life. By weaving motifs from earlier scenes into the following moments, Hitchcock uses the score to emphasise the instability of identity and the emotional cost of deception. "Carlotta's Portrait"'s use of the habanera - its rhythm being historically linked with seduction and mystery - sets such a scene. Its perpetuo structure causes the music to remain unresolved, reflecting not only Scottie's spiraling obsession but also the unstable identity of the woman he believes to be Madeline. The melody's loop evokes a sense of emotional disorientation, depicting the film's ongoing tension between appearance and truth. This theme is explored again with "The Letter," when Judy confesses in a letter about how she impersonated Madeline as part of a murder plot. As Judy hesitates while writing the truth, Herrmann interweaves together the string part of the habanera with the more gentle rendition of the valser romantico, portraying conflict between the past (habanera) and present (valser). When Judy ultimately tears up the letter and chooses to stay with Scottie, the music responds with a waltz in seemingly full bloom, showing her hope for redemption. Nevertheless, this lyrical moment of the cue is shadowed by irony, considering how this convergence of multiple motifs from past scenes reveals how Judy's identity has become compromised. Through Herrmann's score, identity becomes an issue of emotions, manipulating and ultimately destroying the individual through deception and desire.

4. Music as a Map to Inner Breakdown

Through Herrmann's music, Hitchcock also guides the audience through Scottie's mental decline, tracking his state from disorientation, delusion, and ultimately devastation. The film begins with "Prelude and Rooftop," an unsettling musical overture that establishes the theme of psychological instability from the very start. The endless cycle of oscillating triplets in both major and minor modes combined with dramatic waves of dissonance creates a sense of disorientation, presenting a sonic reflection of the tension between illusion and reality. The horns in the theme dramatically introduce the four-note Mystery Theme while the strings and celeste attempt to develop the Love Theme - again not reaching a full and complete end - hinting once again at the unattainable and catastrophic nature of Scottie's romantic obsession. The transition into the rooftop chase, with horns and low strings accelerating the tempo, further intensifies this theme as Scottie clings to life and watches his partner fall to his death; this moment marks the beginning of Scottie's psychological fracture, emphasized much more strongly by the grotesque presentation of the harp glissandi and the first entrance of the Death Chord. Later in "The Bay,"



the music grows more mournful as Scottie follows Madeline, accumulating into a cacophony of sharp, descending chords as she leaps into the water. Herrmann continues this pattern of emotional disintegration in “The Beach,” where he diffuses strings and dark woodwinds to foreshadow the surrender of both characters to their doomed devotion to one another. Herrmann’s final blow comes in “The Nightmare and Dawn,” where the Love Theme is grotesquely twisted within Scottie’s hallucinatory dream, punctuated again by the Death Chord. Even after Scottie’s release from the sanitarium, the music portrays his incomplete return to reality and entrapment in the past. The final swelling of the Love Theme as he looks over San Francisco is mournful, suggesting the looks of a man consumed by madness and haunted by death. Through this intricate and emotionally brutal musical journey, Herrmann ensures that the audience both witnesses and feels for themselves Scottie’s decline into despair.

5. Conclusion

Herrmann’s score in *Vertigo* acts more than just background “filler”, but also as a psychological drive that delves further into the film’s interpretations of obsession, identity, madness, and death. Through persistent motifs like the repetitive habanera rhythms, the numerous unresolved romantic waltz elements, and the sharp dissonance of the Death Chord, Herrmann depicts Scottie’s emotional downfall and dependence on illusions than reality through musical forms.

References

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