

DEVON ROTHMAN LIVE

'We all go a little mad sometimes...' So went the original poster tagline for what's regularly voted Alfred Hitchcock's scariest film – if not one of the most frightening movies of all time. And in the nearly 60 years since its release, *Psycho* has lost none of its power to chill and unsettle.

It might come as a surprise, then, that Hitchcock found it such a hard film to make. He based it on Robert Bloch's 1959 novel of the same name, after his assistant Peggy Robertson suggested the book might make a good movie. Hitchcock agreed, but his studio, Paramount, didn't, judging the novel 'too repulsive' for a film. In the end, Hitchcock persuaded them by offering to shoot it quickly and cheaply in black and white, using a crew from his *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* TV series. *Psycho* was filmed in just five weeks on a tight budget of \$800,000 – and went on to gross more than \$40m at its numerous cinema releases.

A large part of *Psycho*'s success, however, is down to its score by Bernard Herrmann: Hitchcock himself stated that '33 per cent of the effect of *Psycho* was due to the music'. Just watch the arresting opening credits: unusually, Hitchcock placed the composer's name in penultimate place, just before his own, indicating perhaps that he considered Herrmann second only to himself in the film's genesis.

Herrmann's decision to use only a string orchestra was partly down to cost, but

also partly to create what he called a 'black and white score' to complement the movie's black and white photography. The angry chords and driving rhythms of his opening music, heard against Saul Bass' distinctive title sequence, return to herald the anxiety Marion feels when her boss spots her fleeing Phoenix, and again when a freak rainstorm forces her to pull in at the Bates Motel. Herrmann's richly Romantic evocations accompanying Marion and Sam's afternoon tryst could come straight from Mahler or Rachmaninov, however, and there, the film's earlier sense of foreboding is largely forgotten.

The shrieking violins of the murder scene, however, do away with any semblance of subtlety and place us directly in the path of the killer's knife – also returning to our ears when the truth about Norman's mother is finally discovered. Ironically, Hitchcock originally asked Herrmann specifically *not* to score the pivotal shower scene – but Herrmann went ahead anyway. When he heard Herrmann's creation, Hitchcock loved it (and promptly doubled the composer's fee).

Only at the very end, as Norman stares malevolently at us from his cell, does Herrmann's austere, unnervingly monochrome music convey the bleakness and confusion within his mind – before ending on an angry but defiantly dissonant chord.

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