

# *Psycho*

FILM SCORE BY BERNARD HERRMANN

WRITTEN BY: [Betsy Schwarm](#)

***Psycho***, [film score](#) by American composer [Bernard Herrmann](#) for the 1960 [film](#) of the same name, directed by [Alfred Hitchcock](#).

Although Herrmann wrote many acclaimed film scores over his long career, none is as recognizable as the score he wrote for Hitchcock's thriller; the shrieking [string](#) theme that accompanies the famous murder scene is one of the best-known pieces of [music](#) ever composed for film. Budget constraints had forced Herrmann to limit his orchestra to a small string ensemble, but the sparer textures of strings complemented the film's black-and-white cinematography. To match Hitchcock's sometimes [surreal](#) images, Herrmann drew upon avant-garde music by using edgy [harmonies](#) and [dissonances](#). The instruments in the string ensemble were played with mutes and without vibrato, producing a harsh cold sound. Like the film itself, Herrmann's score was widely imitated; its anxious, repetitive themes punctuated by shocking cues at moments of violence became the [prototype](#) for music in the emerging "slasher" [genre](#) of [horror films](#).

# Behind the Mask: Music in *Psycho*

The extraordinary thing about the score to *Psycho* is that it was written for strings only. So immediately, Bernard Herrmann decided to do away with what a traditional orchestral palette might offer. There's no woodwind, no percussion, no brass: you're limited to just strings. The great thing about this is that you have a range of tonalities and effects, and also pitch – you can go from the very lowest note in the double basses right up to the higher harmonics in the violins. Also, you can pluck the strings, hit the instrument with your bow...

there's an awful lot of things you can do on strings to make it sound different.

Interestingly enough, it is the complete opposite of what Alfred Hitchcock had asked for. He asked Herrmann to score it with a very light, jazzy, be-bop kind of score. And Herrmann is famously a



man who doesn't really take instruction from anyone. I think he's quoted as saying, 'If I ever have to do what a director tells me to, I'd rather not do the film. I just can't work like that.' As a composer, one can understand the beauty of being allowed to do exactly what you want, but it's very rare that you're afforded the opportunity to do that.

Herrmann also thought that directors generally didn't know anything about music, that if films were scored the way directors wanted, they'd be a disaster. So it's a very bold statement to be making musically.

Famously Hitchcock did leave him to do exactly what he wanted. So there's always this odd dichotomy: film composition and filmmaking is a team sport, and Herrmann was a hugely important part of the team, but wanted to do his own thing.

It's probably the first film where parody was due to come soon after, because no one had ever, ever heard a sound like the one he made for the shower scene. Which again, astonishingly, Hitchcock had said he didn't want any music for – he wanted it all done on sound – the sound of the curtain ripping, some dull screams and the water going down the drain. It was when they screened it that Hitchcock was very worried and thought he might cut the scene down. And Herrmann said 'I've got an idea...'