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Jack Sullivan: *Hitchcock's Music.*

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006 [xix, 354 p. ISBN: 0300110502. $38.00] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

TOM SCHNELLER

Jack Sullivan's ambitious but disappointing new book, *Hitchcock's Music*, is a survey of the music used in the director's more than 50 feature films, as well as his television shows *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*. The 25 chapters proceed largely in chronological order, from Blackmail (1929) to *Family Plot* (1976), with the focus squarely on Hitchcock's American period (there is little information about Hitchcock's collaboration with the composers who scored his British films, like Louis Levy or Hal Dolphe). Sullivan devotes individual chapters to the music and post-production history of a number of films with particularly significant scores, including Rebecca, *Spellbound*, Vertigo, and *Psycho*, while grouping others under single chapter headings ("Sounds of War," "Hitchcock's Fifties Comedies" etc.).

Sullivan's premise that "one cannot fully understand Hitchcock's movies without facing his music" is a welcome corrective to the traditional approach to film criticism, which too often tends to ignore the music. He demonstrates convincingly that "many of Hitchcock's most original films make music a crucial part of the narrative—sometimes the key to the mystery . . . ," as in *Young and Innocent*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, or *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. In addition to interviewing composers Maurice Jarre and John Williams, Sullivan cites documents such as Hitchcock's music notes or Selznick's production memos, and reveals fascinating details such as Hitchcock's attempt to hire Shostakovich to score *Topaz*. The passages based on archival materials, and in particular the interview with Williams, which is excerpted in the chapter on *Family Plot*, are genuinely interesting and constitute a useful contribution to film music studies.

However, *Hitchcock's Music* tends to go out of tune whenever Sullivan departs from primary sources to engage in discussion and interpretation of the music, which unfortunately occurs for most of the book. Sullivan is not a musicologist—he is Professor of English and the director of American Studies at Rider University—and his grasp of musical terminology is tenuous, as I will discuss. There are no music examples apart from a few single-page reproductions of conductor scores by Waxman, Webb and Herrmann. The book's title suggests that music will be the topic, but in his introduction, Sullivan specifies that *Hitchcock's Music* is neither a work "about movie composers," nor is it about "scores or musical analysis." It is directed to "those who want to experience [Hitchcock's] work from a different point of view—to watch as well as listen" (p. xviii). Since Sullivan has neither the goal nor, I assume, the ability to do serious musical analysis, his only tool of engaging with his subject matter is impressionistic verbal description. Of course this would not be a problem if the main focus of the book were biographical or historical research—there are many informative books on film music that do not delve into specific musical issues. But Sullivan's goal is more ambitious. His thesis is based on a highly problematic proposition, one that is reflected in the very title of the book: namely, that to a significant degree, Hitchcock himself shaped the musical language of film scores written for him between 1929 and 1976 by more than 20 different composers on two continents in a manner specific and consistent enough to constitute a distinct "musical signature." This auteurist perspective reduces the composer to a musical minion whose role consisted merely in connecting the dots provided for him by the director: "Using detailed music notes, Hitchcock plotted sounds, effects, musical emotions, and even technical devices, then let the

composer 'figure it out for himself'" (p. xvii).

By implying that Hitchcock manipulated composers into writing the exact kind of music he had in mind, Sullivan is able to construct an image of "Hitchcock as maestro" (the title of the last chapter) who, in the end, gets to take the bow for "his" music. Sullivan's prose repeatedly conveys the impression that, in addition to his talents as a filmmaker, Hitchcock was a composer whose music evolved through distinct stylistic periods:

> Just as Hitchcock learned the art of visuals from German expressionists in the 1920s, he picked up musical traits from the same aesthetic: … discordant harmonies, astringent orchestration, nervous silences, sudden dynamic contrasts, minimalist chord repetitions, spectral pizzicato. … Only when he began working for Gaumont in the mid-1930s did Hitchcock, with Louis Levy as his musical director, begin using a more British musical language, with firmer harmonies and Elgarian rhetoric (p. 2).

Reading Sullivan, one might think that the director was a gifted melodist …

> Hitchcock's characteristic love themes [are] at once lyrical and understated, full of sentiment but slightly cool. Elegant woodwinds sing the tune, as they do in the love theme for the Hollywood variation of *The 39 Steps*, *North by Northwest*. Hitchcock used these romance themes only sparingly … (p. 41-42).

… or that Hitchcock was skillful in developing motivic material:

> The main title [of *Notorious*] is an ingenious chromatic paragraph, easily recognizable yet sufficiently complex to permit all manner of sly variations, which Hitchcock exploits to the maximum … (p. 133).

And who would have guessed that the Master of Suspense excelled at orchestration? Sullivan outlines the "distinctive Hitchcockian instrumental touches: a demonic use of the (normally) celestial harp, creepy organ sonorities, disappearing brass fanfares, and distant timpani to announce a death," (p. 2-3) and later informs us that "throughout his career, Hitchcock favored bell-like keyboard and percussion …" (p. 133). But Hitchcock's instrumental palette was not, it seems, restricted merely to the orchestra; he was also a pioneer of electronic music: "The bass vibrations" of the score for *Notorious* "… are so intense that we suspect Hitchcock is experimenting with electronic instruments, as he did with *Spellbound* …" (p. 135).

Never mind that it was Miklós Rózsa who proposed the use of an electronic instrument for the *Spellbound* score. As the composer recalled, "Hitchcock and Selznick hadn't heard of the theremin, and weren't quite sure whether you ate it or took it for headaches, but they agreed to try it out" (p. 108). Although Sullivan quotes this remark, its import seems to have escaped him: it wasn't Hitchcock who experimented with electronic instruments in *Spellbound*, it was Rózsa, just as the credit for the sophisticated motivic development in *Notorious* belongs not to Hitchcock but to Roy Webb, and the "elegant woodwinds" of *North by Northwest* that supposedly epitomize the Hitchcockian love theme were chosen by Bernard Herrmann and nobody else. The only person to compose a score for a Hitchcock film was the composer, and that's who should be getting the sole credit for the music.

But why quibble with such details: while Sullivan concedes that "movies are a collaborative enterprise, of course," and that it is "difficult to pin down Hitchcock's exact contribution and degree of control in the final musical mix" he concludes that it is "reasonable to assume that he controlled a great deal" since "the Hitchcock musical universe, using a variety of composers and songwriters over five decades, has a compelling unity" (p. 3). What exactly does this compelling unity consist of?

> Hitchcock's musical signatures were present from the beginning, including general devices such as counterpoint and specific effects such as chimes, lonely bass and timpani solos, ambiguous bitonal chords, and sudden silences, but they are not reducible to a single pattern. Indeed, they bristle with tensions and oppositions: music can be a consolation or treachery, a force of healing or destruction, revelation or obfuscation, truth or evasion, innocence or guilt (p. 320).

One is reminded of Mark Rutland's memorable phrase from *Marnie*: "Let's back up and see if you can turn that Mount Everest of manure into a few facts." But *facts* are in short supply here. Beyond vague observations such as "creepy organ sonorities" or the preponderance of "elegant woodwinds" in love themes, which are so general as to be meaningless, Sullivan produces no hard evidence for his notion that Hitchcock imparted specific characteristics to the music written for his films.

It might be useful to determine which aspects of sound and music actually *can* be demonstrated to have been micromanaged by Hitchcock. The director's detailed sound notes indicate beyond doubt

that he "composed" sounds in the same meticulous way that he envisioned images or controlled the "jigsaw cutting" of his films, as is evident from his dubbing notes to *Family Plot*: "Outside Blanche's house just a faint car or two passing by, maybe a barking dog in the distance, just some sounds to give us the atmosphere of the suburbs of a city …" (p. 315).[1] Sullivan's view of Hitchcock as maestro works for *The Birds*, since here the director did not have to deal with musical notes but only with pure noise, which he could arrange (with Bernard Herrmann's assistance) into meticulously choreographed soundscapes.

The choice of specific pieces of source music, and the consistent role of music as a plot device, can also be credited to Hitchcock. Sullivan perceptively traces the director's recurring use of waltzes, carnival music, and jazz, which are often used to heighten suspense or to create a stark ironic contrast to grim events, and demonstrates that in many Hitchcock films, music is a "crucial part of the narrative" (most spectacularly in the Albert Hall sequences from the two versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*).

But in regard to original scoring, the case is more complicated. This was the one aspect of his films that Hitchcock could not control directly. The hieroglyphics of musical notation, the intricate syntax of harmony, the complex palette of orchestral timbres presented the director with a "language barrier" that he could not circumvent and which forced him to rely on the composer's initiative. Hitchcock's music notes, to which Sullivan ascribes such extraordinary weight, present at most a bare framework. They range from simple spotting ("Start music on cut to Norman in Interior of Police Station jail. Continue as camera dollies in and covers last speech. Music ends on fade end title") to general expressive indications ("Dear Mr. Musician—Please do not make the error that this is a heavy dramatic scene of escape—it is a comic one yet a daring one") to the occasional specifically musical suggestion ("[music] continues through cell scene getting louder and gradually losing instruments one by one until double bass is only instrument playing …"). It should be emphasized that of the music notes cited by Sullivan, the last category is the distinct exception (and only assumes importance in the case of *Frenzy*, for which Hitchcock provided a number of timbral suggestions).[2]

Sullivan's argument loses credibility as soon as he blurs the distinction between Hitchcock's control over sound design and source music on the one hand and his control over scoring on the other. It is indisputable that the director was in complete control of the former, and it makes sense to look for consistent patterns—an auteurial thumbprint—in these areas, as Sullivan does convincingly. But sound design and the selection of source music are in a separate category from music composed specifically to fit the film. Hitchcock may have indicated precisely where such music should occur, and from time to time given a few general guidelines regarding character and timbre; but to deduce from this that Hitchcock was a "maestro" who imparted "compelling unity" to the scores he commissioned betrays a remarkable ignorance of what it takes to create a musical work. Among the composers hired by Hitchcock to score his films were several of Hollywood's most idiosyncratic artistic personalities, and they signed their scores with their own distinct "musical signatures."[3]

Sullivan's idea of Hitchcock as musical ventriloquist is directly contradicted by the testimony of these composers. Herrmann put it most succinctly:

> Hitchcock is very sensitive: he leaves me alone! (Fortunately, because if Hitchcock were left to his own devices, he would play "In a Monastery Garden" behind all his pictures!).[4]

Rózsa recalls in his memoirs that while working on *Spellbound* he saw Hitchcock "only twice during the whole job," and describes the director's "precise requirements: a big sweeping love theme for Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck, and a "new sound" for the paranoia which formed the subject of the picture."[5] Rather broad guidelines. John Addison played his cues for

1 See also Dan Auiler, *Hitchcock's Notebooks: An Authorized and Illustrated Look Inside the Creative Mind of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 495-505.

2 Sullivan claims that Hitchcock's music notes for *Frenzy* prove that it's a "myth" that Hitchcock "simply stayed out of the way of composers. [Composer Ron] Goodwin was clearly directed, having been given specifications of mood, color, and even a bit of orchestration." But even in this case, Hitchcock's musical suggestions are restricted to generalities on the level of "the music should continue with a tremolo," or "[the music] rises to a sharp chord"—instructions that could be realized in very different ways by different composers (Sullivan, 301-302).

3 Even in regard to his screenplays, the writing of which Hitchcock carefully supervised, the auteurist image of the director as sole mastermind is an exaggeration, as the following quote by screenwriter John Michael Hayes indicates: "The stamp of Hitchcock's genius is on every frame of the finished film, but the impression that he did every bit of it alone is utter nonsense. I did what every other writer did for him—I wrote! But to read Hitchcock's interviews, it's possible to get the impression that he wrote the script, developed the characters, provided the motivation." (cited in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), p. 370.

4 Evan William Cameron, ed. *Sound and the Cinema: The Coming of Sound to American Film* (New York, Redgrave Publishing Company, 1980), 121-22.

5 Miklós Rózsa, *Double Life* (New York: Wynwood Press, 1982), 146.

Torn Curtain to Hitchcock on the piano over the telephone. The director's reaction? "Most of the time [Hitchcock] would just say 'Right.'"[6] Maurice Jarre recalls the complete freedom he enjoyed on *Topaz*: Hitchcock told him that "he wouldn't tell a composer he hired how to compose any more than he would tell Cary Grant how to act" (p. 292). Sullivan does not ignore such accounts; he simply sidesteps the obvious conclusion by implying that Hitchcock's instructions were somehow so richly informative that all the composer had to do was "figure it out for himself."

In a 1964 interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Hitchcock himself conceded, with evident frustration, how little control he had over his composers—this from a director who usually claimed credit for the labor of his collaborators:

> Markle: How do you and Mr. Herrmann go about examining the contribution of music in a film?
>
> Hitchcock: I don't know. As far as I'm concerned he does as he likes … I've always found with musicians you're in their hands anyway. What can you do? So very often I've been asked—not necessarily by Mr. Herrmann, but by other musicians—they say, "Come down, I want to know what you think of this." You go down and you say, "I don't care for it." [And they say,] "Well you can't change it; it's all scored." So the next time you take care and you say, "Can you play me some and let me hear some before you go to the expense of an orchestra?" [And they say,] "Oh no, no. You can't play it on a piano. It's not possible." So there is no way to find out. So you are in the hands of a musician.[7]

It is perhaps no coincidence that the skewed thesis of "Hitchcock's Music" is the work of an author whose specialty is not music. The fact that Sullivan does not have to deal with actual notes allows him to escape into the realm of the purely rhetorical, where he is free to construct the image of Hitchcock the maestro without being encumbered by empirically verifiable details. His book adds to the body of academic writing about film music by scholars of Literature or Film Studies who are, in some cases, simply not equipped to seriously discuss musical matters. The following quote from Sullivan's discussion of Waxman's music for *Suspicion* gives a fair idea of the level of his musical exegesis:

> "Car Ride" begins with silken strings as the lovers exchange endearments, degenerates into ugly discords when Lina reveals Johnnie's job termination, then lurches back to romance when Johnnie turns on the charm. As he declares his intention to develop a spectacular sea vista, a horn plays a lyrical but anxious solo (p. 88).

Page after page of this type of bland, descriptive rambling, studded with adjectives like "fizzy," "shuddery," or "goose-pimply," make long stretches of the book a monotonous read that is only occasionally relieved by flashes of interest—usually when the author steps aside and lets the primary sources speak for themselves by citing Hitchcock's music notes, Selznick memos, or the composers who worked with Hitchcock.

Sullivan's ignorance of basic terminology hampers his ability to discuss music meaningfully. He defines suspensions as "chords that droop down rather than resolve," (p. 50) and refers vaguely to "an anxious Herrmann dissonance that simultaneously employs major and minor intervals" (p. 285). Musical terms beginning with "counter" seem to confuse him, as is evident in his discussion of Arthur Benjamin's main title to the original *Man Who Knew Too Much*: "The motto is followed by a lush countermelody for strings, a straight-ahead, heroic theme rather than the droopy and morose countersubject in Bernard Herrmann's main title for the remake" (p. 33). A countermelody is a counterpoint to the main melody, not a separate theme, which is what Sullivan is describing. It is also not a synonym for a countersubject, a term specific to fugue. Not content with the terminological havoc he has wreaked, Sullivan coins a new term, "counterscore," in the next paragraph, in which Herrmann is credited with writing a "noirish counterscore to the Benjamin cantata" for the 1956 remake. To provide impressive-sounding stuffing for his sentences, Sullivan resorts to any musical term that comes to mind, whether it makes sense or not, as in the following description of a cue from *Dial M for Murder*: "For the most part, The Plan plays, like a ritornello, at a constant volume, providing somber counterpoint" (p. 166). Leaving aside the enigmatic reference to ritornello, there is ambiguity here (and elsewhere in the book) as to how Sullivan intends the term counterpoint: does he mean musical counterpoint or counterpoint as an aesthetic category of film music, in which the music plays "against" the image?

Considering that the book was not written for specialists—Sullivan "pitched [*Hitchcock's Music*] to all who love Hitchcock, whether general readers and moviegoers or academics" (p. xviii) —does it matter that his terminology is a

6 Steven Smith, *A Heart at Fire's Center* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 273.

7 Telescope: *A Talk With Hitchcock*, CBC Television, 1964, http://bernardherrmann.org/articles/transcripts/telescope/ (accessed August 31, 2007).

bit fuzzy? Perhaps not, although it is doubtful that the general reader will find much value in references to countersubjects and ritornelli. However, Sullivan's attempt at impersonating a musicologist is problematic in that it allows him to drape the cloak of academic respectability over observations that would otherwise perish in the cold. Statements such as "This is a modern symphony of dread, repression, and final release based on color and wandering harmony"[8] (p. 79) have a sonorous ring, but they offer little—to either academics or the general reader.

While Sullivan projects an image of confident expertise, his book is riddled with careless errors. For example, he nonchalantly throws Waxman, Rózsa, and Tiomkin into the same pot as "Jews fleeing the Nazis" (p. 61). But Tiomkin was not fleeing the Nazis; he had settled in Hollywood in 1929, four years before Hitler came to power. Sullivan attributes the climactic cue of *Rebecca* ("The Fire") to Franz Waxman when it was in fact written by Robert Russell Bennett.[9] His frequent sloppiness results in odd mistakes: "As with his use of Walter Benjamin [sic], Johann Strauss, and Cole Porter, Hitchcock veered toward classical composers who based their art on popular motifs" (p. 144) Sullivan must have meant Arthur Benjamin, the composer, not the philosopher; but in any case, neither Strauss nor Porter were "classical" composers. Plain factual mistakes cause several of Sullivan's conceptual soufflés to collapse, as in the following passage pertaining to *The Wrong Man*:

> Rose's psychiatrist describes her as trapped in a "maze of terror" and existing on "the dark side of the moon," a mental wasteland the music captures with spectral organ music called "The Parting" (precursor of the graveyard organ in *Vertigo*) as Manny takes her to the asylum. Beginning with *Secret Agent*, continuing with the novachord in the *Rebecca* era, and culminating in the avant-garde sonorities in Herrmann and Williams, Hitchcock used the king of instruments to cue psychological states, in this case crushing depression. (p. 213).

The problem with this grandiloquent generalization is that "Hitchcock" did not use an organ at all in "The Parting." Herrmann scored it for oboe, four clarinets, and bass clarinet, as Sullivan could have easily verified, if not by ear, then by consulting the score in the Herrmann archive at University of California at Santa Barbara. Similar inaccuracies mar Sullivan's recollection of film scenes, as in his description of a scene from *Foreign Correspondent*: "Like a character in an opera, Johnny sings his theme in the bathroom just before his balcony escape. . . ." (p. 100). The analogy to opera misfires completely, since Johnny doesn't sing; he whistles.[10] In addition to these and other mistakes, there are a number of spelling errors (Marnie's horse is Forio, not Florio, the German cabaretist is Spoliansky, not Spolliansky, the "astute critic of cinema soundtracks" is Gorbman, not Gorban, and David Raksin is consistently misspelled as Raskin). It does no credit to Yale University Press that Sullivan's editor evidently devoted little attention to checking spelling and basic musical terminology.

Sullivan's readings of Hitchcock films are often contrived and sometimes inconsistent. Note, for example, the flexible—or rather, protean—symbolic significance of the main character of *Rebecca*. On page 61, we learn that

> "*Rebecca's* story line also fit the émigré pattern. Like Hitchcock and Waxman, its nameless heroine is an orphan, a stranger in a bizarre, glamorous new world. Manderley is a stand-in for Hollywood, a wondrous but artificial place full of seductive wealth and great peril."

By page 75, Sullivan seems to have forgotten his original interpretation, and now the heroine is supposed to represent the youthful whiff of America, instead of the bewildered European refugee:

> "The interaction among Selznick, Hitchcock, and Waxman, the New World and the Old, full of tension yet often complementary, parallels the *Rebecca* story line. The unnamed heroine played by Joan Fontaine—young, naïve, and clumsy, yet brave and spunky—is a stand-in for America, though not identified as an American, a breath of freshness and innocence, her identity unformed; her lover, Max, played by Laurence Olivier—brooding, burned out, given to sudden rages, obsessed by a dead past—is a European with lots of baggage, the Old World aristocrat reinvigorated and saved by the New."

In addition to blatantly contradicting himself, Sullivan's flowery prose scales new summits of banality. The clichés about the "aristocratic," "brooding" "Old World" rejuvenated by the fresh breath of the naive but spunky "New World" would be more at

8 This is in reference to Waxman's *Rebecca*.

9 Thanks to William H. Rosar for pointing out to me that it was Bennett who composed "The Fire."

10 Sullivan's carelessness in this detail causes him to miss the subtle timbral pun set up by Hitchcock: as Johnny climbs onto the balustrade of the hotel, we hear the distant sound of a police whistle. This mocking echo of Johnny's insouciant whistling in the bathroom reflects the contrast between the fresh-faced naivity of the intrepid war reporter and the sinister circumstances in which he finds himself.

home in a Harlequin Romance than an ostensible work of scholarship. Nonetheless, Sullivan delights in pulling out these withered chestnuts at every opportunity, as when he pontificates about emigré composers like Waxman and Tiomkin who "learned to combine European formalism [?] with Hollywood glamour," which provided the perfect counterpart to "Hitchcock's mixture of European sophistication and American brashness," (p. 61) or when he opines that "Hitchcock's Old World sophistication needed Herrmann's New York brashness and iconoclasm" (p. 251).

As is evident from the above discussion, Sullivan is not a reliable guide through the musical world of Hitchcock's films. His attempt to cast Hitchcock as musical maestro is propped up largely by grandiose generalizations rather than specific evidence, and his book is rife with errors and contradictions. Nonetheless, *Hitchcock's Music* has received favorable reactions. Edward Rothstein wrote a glowing review in the *The New York Times*,[11] and the back cover of *Hitchcock's Music* lists rhapsodies of praise from a number of experts (none of them musicologists), including Camille Paglia ("a richly evocative study … sparkling sensibility … vividly documents Hitchcock's restless eclecticism and bold interweaving of musical styles"), Sidney Gottlieb ("a wonderfully coherent, comprehensive, groundbreaking and thoroughly engaging study"), Michael Wood ("lovingly researched") and David Sterritt ("a milestone in Hitchcock criticism"). One can only hope that these scholars do not apply the generous standards by which they judge a book on film music to their own fields of expertise.

11 Edward Rothstein, "Hitchcock, Thrilling the Ears as Well as the Eyes," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2007.

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