



Blackmail At The Barbican

Alfred Hitchcock's 1929 silent classic took on a new gravity at the Barbican last week.

James Mansfield

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In Alfred Hitchcock's [Blackmail](#), Alice White (Anny Ondra) is the bored girlfriend of a dour Scotland Yard detective, with no interest in going to the movies as she's 'seen it all before'. As a rejoinder to her indifference, cinema's great sadist swiftly dispatches one of his very first blondes into the hands of a seductive painter, whose attempted rape is scuppered when she frantically kills him in self defence. Still not satisfied that his audience's desire for originality and innovation has been sated, he makes another film. It's also called *Blackmail*, but this one comes with synchronised sound.

It is both Hitch's last silent film and his first talkie. Filmed in 1929 in two versions released a couple of months apart, it straddles cinema's first great revolution. The silent version of *Blackmail* has long remained the lesser known of the two, so it's particularly heartening to see such a large audience attend its screening at the [Barbican](#). That said, there's no doubt the main draw is the new score by Neil Brand, performed on stage by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Blackmail is a wild ride, a darkly comic thriller to which the score provides a beautiful response. Deeply engaged with the images, the music enacts a playful tussle that thickens the texture of Hitchcock's drama. The style is reminiscent of some of Bernard Herrmann's classic scores, a neat move that uncovers echoes between the director's early and late work. The murder plays out with similar musical grandiosity as [Psycho](#)'s shower scene, but what we see on the screen is an inversion as the curtain obscures our view. It's shown in one shot and rudimentary in comparison, but made equally powerful and affecting by the orchestra. Brand often appears to be moulding the narrative. He stretches out moments of suspense to breaking point before quickening the pace, using effects to create scenes of great comedy. The orchestra do a fine job on the night, conducted magnificently by Timothy Brock, who ensures doorbells ring and knives stab at just the right moment.



It's worth being reminded how skillfully Hitchcock integrated technical advances into his art. This screening of *Blackmail* feels particularly timely, as new ways of seeing and absorbing films continue to emerge. The Barbican audience also want to see something different. The film was shown as part of its [Contemporary Music programme](#), and it makes you wonder whether a silent film could ever attract such a sizable crowd on its own terms.

Regardless, it's remarkable to witness an act of musical creation that not only works to preserve cinema history, but makes the old speak to us in new ways.