

Working with Hitch

By Neil Brand

There is a moment halfway through Hitchcock's 1929 masterpiece '*Blackmail*' (in its silent version), when the heroine, Alice, still dishevelled from her all-night walk home after murdering a would-be rapist, sits on her bed and racks her weary brains for a way out of the nightmare. We see her looking at herself, expressionless in the dressing-table mirror, then looking up at the wall behind it... and seeing her boyfriend's photograph. We know he is a detective (although in the photo he's a uniformed constable - their relationship goes back a long way) and we also saw them part on bad terms – however, by the dawning light in her eyes we understand that Frank is the only person she can trust to help her. She runs and throws on her clothes as fast as possible, turning before our eyes from night-time diva to daytime dutiful daughter (coincidentally the second time in fifteen minutes that Hitch has let us watch her undress), aware that in solving the immediate problem of where to get help, Alice has also given herself further obstacles to overcome in getting to Frank without her parents getting wind of what has happened. In creating an opportunity for escape, Alice has let herself in for more suspenseful action.

It is a beautifully handled sequence, no more than 40 seconds in total, solving so many narrative problems with a couple of looks and a photograph, as well as drawing us seamlessly into the second act of the drama, but it so desperately needs music to help it make its impact. Watching the sequence in silence we will certainly understand the train of thought it evokes but we will still be outside observers, coolly following Hitch's paper trail to primarily intellectual conclusions, which we as audience members may reach at different

speeds. With the right music, however, we can become Alice, be inside her skin, feel her desperation and share communally the exact moment at which the world changes for her and she glimpses a chink of light down the tunnel. We will go from being observers of the action to being willing participants, as is always the intention of Hitch's voyeuristic camera. The sensory gaps left by silent cinema will be filled in with music strong enough to make an impact, but hopefully discreet enough that the audience won't register the extent to which they are being manipulated.

In 1933, Hitchcock gave an interview to Stephen Watts of the distinguished industry publication *Cinema Quarterly*, specifically dealing with music and film and related to his discoveries in making '*Waltzes from Vienna*'. In it he remarked -

'Film music and cutting have a great deal in common. The purpose of both is to create the tempo and mood of the scene. And, just as the ideal cutting is the kind you don't notice *as* cutting, so with music. (...) I think cutting has definite limitations. Its best use is in violent subjects. That is why the Russians made such effective use of it, because they were dealing with violence, and they could pile shock on shock by means of cutting. (...) But if I am sitting here with you discussing the Five Year Plan, no amount of cutting can make a film of us dramatic because the scene is not dramatic. You cannot achieve quiet, restrained effects that way. But you might express the mood and tone of our conversation with music that would illuminate or even subtly comment on it.'

It's an obvious point to make but in scoring silent films the music is all the sound there is, an enormous luxury for a film composer used to competing dialogue and effects tracks. Hitchcock would have hated the idea of a non-stop score for one of his films but in this

instance he just has to put up with the inconvenience. However there is guidance to be had from his words – music *as* cutting is a good way to look at silent film scoring. The score will speed up action, slow it down, point up elements of the drama, draw us into the action and make its own statements at the same time as Hitch's, but with subtle differences. The narrative 'road map' is the same for visuals and music, but they are not in the same car.

In my own mind, at least, I have 'worked with Hitch'. The Blackmail score I composed in 2008 may have arrived late for the party, but I hope that, in composing it, I have consciously emulated what Hitchcock demanded his art should be – pure cinema. To achieve this impertinent goal my inspirations were three-fold; firstly, the film itself which speaks volumes with every shot - next, such understanding as I could manage of Hitchcock himself, from interviews, biographies and his other movies – this, to me, was particularly important. Finally, there was the 'Hitchcock score' which, despite the fact that Hitch worked with numerous composers during his sound career, undoubtedly exists.

So often, the modern TV shorthand for Hitch is the classic profile accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's theme from *Vertigo*, the director's entire oeuvre summed up in those menacingly circling arpeggios. *Psycho*, *Spellbound*, *North-by-Northwest*, *Marnie*, these scores are symphonically planned, orchestrally and harmonically complex, weighted towards the tonality of Bernard Herrmann and Miklos Rozsa, tinged throughout with darkness and dread. As a young student listening obsessively to records of Hitchcock scores in the 80s I heard the unmistakable sound of 50s Hollywood, the tightening of the screw in the suspense scenes, the self-referential tension and thrill motifs which soared romantically in the love scenes but carried always just a hint of warning that there may be no happy

ending. In landing the dream commission of tackling the silent *Blackmail*, I felt I needed all the help I could get to reach the heights of the Master. Utilising the musical approaches that Rosza, Herrmann and Waxman had brought to Hitch's work gave me the advantage – I consciously stood on the shoulders of these great Hollywood composers to look Hitch in the eye.

So, to the film. Cards on the table, I have always preferred the silent version of *Blackmail* to the sound version. By 1929, Hitch was a master of the techniques of silent cinema; sound made him a pioneer, albeit a hugely gifted one, enmeshed in the new medium of hissing soundtracks and cut-glass accents, piano-playing rapists (with all due respect to song-and-dance man Cyril Ritchard) and iconic sound illusions ('Knife...KNIFE!!') which are the opposite of 'the music you don't notice'. The sound *Blackmail* is ground-breaking, clever, chilling, with a perfectly serviceable score but the silent version is, for me, the greatest British silent film, a mature and adult drama, swift, deft and complex, all in all a more rewarding experience for a modern audience than its sound counterpart.

In dealing with silent films as a live pianist I have always had one paramount aim in mind – to exclude everything from the modern audience's consciousness except the film itself, and to maintain that exclusivity from second to second throughout the running time. That means not just keeping the modern world at bay but any musical or thematic hint of other worlds, with the exception of other film music styles – after all film music is my currency so I must expect to utilise recognisable musical styles and effects.

My approach to silent film has always been to treat the music as a bridge between the age of the film and the age of the audience. Modern audiences are used to eighty years of film music,

synchronised effects, detailed sequential scoring and genre references which have evolved over the lifetime of sound cinema. In bringing these elements to bear on pre-sound cinema I hope that I am providing an atmosphere in which the audience can relax into the film, secure that at least the sound world they inhabit is familiar. The greatest compliment I can receive in these circumstances is 'we forgot you were there'. Truly, the best music score is not the one you don't hear, but the one you hear when you need to. The successful culmination of this approach is to create the impression that the film itself is disgorging the music, and that that music is locking the auditorium doors and lulling us all into a dream world which contains the essence of the film we're watching.

Some films make that exclusivity an easier task than others. The films that continually throw up attitudes or situations that jar by modern standards, which carry dodgy performances or achingly slow developments - these have to be musically negotiated as though driving a saloon car across a ploughed field. The unwanted laughs have to be smoothed over, the turgid scene gunned through, the abrupt ending prepared for. Those blessed silent films with no such drawbacks, which instead effortlessly channel a universality of human experience, are to be cherished and handled with the utmost care. To name a few, *Menschen am Sonntag*, *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*, *Pandora's Box*, *The General*, *Haxan*, *The Black Pirate*, *Sunrise*, *Hell's Heroes*, *The Big Parade*, *Underworld*, *The Informer* and of course *Blackmail* are true works of art as astounding in their timelessness as a Cezanne or a Greek sculpture. To further torture the driving analogy, when accompanying one of those masterpieces the ploughed field is replaced by the Corniche, the saloon car is now high-performance and the thrill is in the smoothness of the ride and the speed one can take the corners.

Blackmail has been in my consciousness for over twenty years. It was one of the first British pictures I accompanied, at a memorable BFI summer school on early British film in Stirling in 1989, an event at which I met for the first time many of the people who have shaped my accompanying career as well as many of the films that I have gone on to score. It still amazes me to this day that the silent *Blackmail* is so little known in comparison with its sound counterpart – indeed in a world in which a badly transferred 16mm dupe of the silent version is offered as an extra on the German DVD of the sound version I feel that celebrating the silent version with a full orchestral accompaniment ignites the silent/sound debate in a wonderfully immediate way. Silent Film is even now the poor relation of its sophisticated offspring for many, particularly those in the media who should realise the difference. Perhaps one day soon silent cinema, to the broad mass of even the culturally aware, will at last come to be recognised for what it is – not sound film with the sound turned down but a theatrically vibrant form of cinema in its own right. As opera is to theatre, silent film is cinema with the emotions musically engaged, not a negation of reality but an emotionally enhanced version of it.

Amongst the British silent movie treasures I encountered in Stirling, *Blackmail* stood out for many reasons – first of all, it was drenched in the character of London, my home town, and its peculiarly British (specifically English) attitudes, few of them particularly wholesome, all character quirks I grew up with and recognised. Hitch's own character is an amalgam of a good Catholic's attitude to sin (guilt and retribution) and a good Londoner's attitude to crime (quiet fascination with those who effortlessly practise it and outright delight at those who stylishly get away with it) and *Blackmail* was, at this point in his career, his most definitive statement of his own

character. Whilst accompanying the film I fell in love, like Hitch, with Anny Ondra and tried to make the music complicit in her seduction (it's that beautiful dress that gets her into trouble - in my score when she wears it she becomes Cinderella unaware she is about to be raped by Prince Charming) and I also tried to mirror Hitch's love of London, its vulgarity and its people, always excepting its policemen.

Then there was the film's moral maturity. Unlike so many of the silents I had experienced in my early performing career *Blackmail* demanded no stark choice between good and bad. Hitch revelled in the shades of grey in human behaviour, unusually given that the roaring British 20s were only so forgiving of waywardness. Yet here were displayed an anti-heroine and a credible, shabby, almost sympathetic villain; a flawed knight-errant and the blind, cosy, salt-of-the-earth Londoners around them, all ultimately at the mercy of the machinery of a rule of law which recognised only the scumbags in its mugshot books and sauntered idly by whilst sexual violence was taking place three floors above. Hitch had never before been as subversive as when he separated his flighty heroine from her boring beau, made us cheer as she got the good time she was after with the exotic artist, then sent her careering back to her besotted detective with blood on her hands, infectious with the virus of shared guilt.

Famously, Hitch wanted an ending for the film that mirrored the opening, with Alice going through the arrest procedure and Frank departing for an evening alone, but the ending foisted on him is, to me, much more chilling. As Frank and Alice walk, stone-faced, down the corridor of Scotland Yard we can see the burden of complicity that they both now carry, the possibility of their expiation painful and long-lasting. Alice may have avoided the noose we saw in shadow around her neck, but in doing so she has condemned them both to a lifetime of guilt and shame. Hitch the Catholic had

inadvertently won the day over Hitch the cynic and he must have been laughing all the way to the premiere.

And so to the music. When the Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna approached me to score *Blackmail* for the Orchestra of the Teatro Comunale, I found myself, for the first time in my life, in the same privileged position as my Hollywood composition heroes – that of working with the best director in the business towards a classic romantic orchestral score in the old tradition, where tonalities seldom entered pure major or minor keys but lurched between the two, matching the characters' flailing (and all too human) moral choices. As *Blackmail* delights in the grey areas of human behaviour, my score attempted to be equally alluring shades of grey. My love of the *noir* scores of Rozsa and Waxman, *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard* et al, had taught me how their tonality, built on full and mouthwatering 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th chord shapes could mirror the moral complexity of the dramatic journey. Chords in those teetering towers of notes become neither major nor minor but somehow both, slipping equally easily into sunny major chords or foreboding minor ones. The simple, memorable melody lines, love themes and action motifs that negotiated the shifting tonalities beneath breathed life into Hitch's silent masterpiece, albeit life it could never have known in its time. But then I never pretend to be writing music that is contemporary with silent films themselves. These movies are there to be translated for a modern audience, not embalmed.

Even dead directors, the good ones anyway, make their musical requirements abundantly clear, either through superb, unambiguous direction, or direct musical reference. Von Stroheim slaps the sheet music of *The Wedding March* in double-exposure across the climactic sequence of that eponymous movie; others show spinning turntables or jangling player-piano music. In *Blackmail* Hitch does none of these

things – instead, from second to second, shot to shot, through the 75-minute running time, he allows no ambiguity in his (and consequently our) opinion of what is taking place.

The opening procedural stands alone, pitched in at top speed from the first frame, working the suspense of darkened staircases and corridors, chuckling along with jovial digs at the police and ending with amusing musical formality as the spyhole in the prison door is slammed shut on the foul-mouthed malefactor. I packed this sequence full of musical ideas, (homage to Herrmann in the chase, bass clarinet under vibes as the police traverse the darkened corridor, slowly drooping strings to match the hunted man's hand movement towards the gun) culminating in a po-faced 'march of the CID' which I'd like to think Hitch would have smiled at. But from the introduction of Alice the music lightens; we are, after all, in the presence of our major character and her kittenish unpredictability becomes the prime musical motif. I gave Hitch's cameo performance the Funeral March for a Marionette at Northern Line speed and sent up the battle for a seat in Lyons Corner House. Then, the music existed primarily in Alice's head as she took the adventurous route into Wonderland with the artist, recognised but dismissed the danger signs, climbed believably into the tutu fuelled by alcohol and unaccustomed romance and finally defended her honour with extreme prejudice, every step of the way beautifully mapped out by Hitch and utterly believable.

I had not had the luxury of a symphony orchestra to play with before but I had heard a lot of film scores and I found the palette it offered solved so many problems. With piano, the statements you wish to make can only be made with changes or accents of tempo or tonality; now a small effect could be signalled with a lead instrument, without interfering with the basic structures. My tunes I

usually introduced lightly, carried by a solo instrument, to be repeated in full with massed strings or vibrant horns but always I tried to make the transitions from thought to thought as smooth and imperceptible as possible. I did consciously break across the music when appropriate, particularly unleashing shockingly loud, braying horns for the 'Laughing Jester' painting and engineering a complete collapse of all musical tonality immediately after the murder (which had to be accompanied by Psycho-style slashes in the strings), preferring instead tightly packed discords of high, legato strings moving slowly and unpredictably under the emergence of a blood-stained Alice, sounding like the ringing in ones ears after a particularly loud noise. By her actions, even in self-defence, the world had irrevocably changed and the music was completely unconnected either side of that traumatic event. Her haunted walk through milling West End theatregoers was the easiest section to score as it was a situation I had seen before countless times in Hitchcock's films – the loner who has committed a crime that separates them from society walking through that society carrying a burden that only they and we recognise. The pace of her steps even set the tempo. But once back home and through the 'Frank's photo' scene, things began to get complicated.

My biggest fear in approaching the film was the 'ordinariness' of its third quarter. The Mexican stand-off between the blackmailer, the honest detective who has betrayed his responsibility and the unconfessed murderess takes place entirely at the counter and parlour of a tobacconists shop. In planning the film I assumed that those scenes would need 'ordinary' music, something I have always had a problem with. In the forty or so TV scores I have written I was always coming up against the challenge of 'doing less'. My influences have always been musical theatre, the great songwriters, the giant

movie soundtracks, so I have always been drawn to the big theme, the self-declamatory music – hence the score or so of TV producers begging me to tone it down, be more repetitive, less demonstrative. If I couldn't do it in twenty years of TV scoring, how could I possibly fit my ideas into a corner shop?

Until I realised I was wrong. Our protagonists are not in the shop or parlour, they're in a world of their own, an arena in which power is shifting from moment to moment and the stakes are higher than any of them have played for before. Actually maintaining that febrile atmosphere of fear and desire in the music made the shop more ordinary, the distance away from the 'real' world all the greater. Hitch had even put down the musical markers for those scenes, the slow, measured pace of the blackmailer's threats, the detective's barely-controlled anger, Alice's rising stress-levels hidden behind a mask of domestic duty. It filled the confrontation with suspense, the call from the police station upping the ante until a misguided Frank and an increasingly desperate blackmailer are nose to nose with Alice in the background, eyes closed, just wishing it could all be over.

And then the final chase as Donald Calthrop barrels through the British Museum to his fate high above the reading room, and Alice stares unseeingly at her guilt unfolding, like Macbeth's daggers, before her eyes, finally standing up to receive the shadowy noose which she knows now waits for her. Even there, thanks to careful placing, I felt Hitch directing the music to climax not on Tracy's despairing cry but on Alice's elevation to the scaffold – Tracy's death only ends the chase, her imaginary execution has to end the film.

Except that it doesn't, and the hardest sequence to score turned out to be Alice and Frank in the Superintendent's office. There was no way this scene could be anything but an anti-climax but at least that

final walk, the guilt-haunted couple barely hearing the desk sergeant's drolleries as the Jester cackled them off to Purgatory, carried all the emotional and cathartic weight I could bring to bear on it. I had consciously left my big 'shared guilt' theme incomplete, hinted at in miniature in the title music, becoming more forceful in the shop, then finally coming to full maturity in these closing seconds before turning into a thunderous major-key finale over the end titles as if to have Hitch saying 'Goodnight. Don't have nightmares'.

I had scored the music sequentially and chronologically over about two months and had enjoyed the experience more than I thought possible, since the close scoring of the film required the closest possible reading of it. It is a truly great film, generous in its insights, its pacing, its surprises - not a second of its running time is wasted. How much my score has done to support it is for others to judge but at least, after October 31st of this year and its British premiere by the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican, people will know that before there was sound, there was Blackmail – and behind that masterpiece a hinterland of silent wonders that have been too long ignored.