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A few years I bought Steven C Smith's *A Heart at Fire's Centre*, a biography of film music composer **Bernard Herrmann**. In my student days the extent of my knowledge of Herrmann's work was probably as the majority of cinema neophytes; he scored the infamous shower sequence in **Psycho** and his final score was Martin Scorsese's **Taxi Driver** – that film is in fact dedicated to Herrmann. In between there was not a lot more beyond seeing such and such film was scored by Herrmann after his credit came up. However these two films were enough to confer canonical status on Herrmann and marked him out as someone to find out more about.

Over the years Herrmann's name kept cropping up, primarily in relation to Hitchcock but also as someone who worked with the a new generation of filmmakers in the 1960s – filmmakers like the previously mentioned Scorsese but also Francois Truffaut, Larry Cohen and Brian De Palma. Herrmann seemed to bridge classic Hollywood and the new movie Brats of the 60s and 70s. I bought the book with a view to finally finding out more about this figure who had crept in and out of my cinematic vision.

And so last year I started the journey into the extraordinary career and life of the musical genius who transformed the way music would be thought of in relation to cinema. Not only did Herrmann score *Psycho* – he put the screaming staccato violins into the infamous shower sequence, one of the defining scenes in the history of cinema, a scene that Hitchcock initially wanted silent.

Herrmann's film work started with **Citizen Kane**. A low-key start then! His career-defining relationship with Hitchcock included **North By North West**, **Vertigo** and **Marnie** and also included such iconic films as J. Lee Thompson's **Cape Fear**, Robert Wise's **The Day the Earth Stood Still** and Nicolas Ray's **On Dangerous Ground**. His final films were Larry Cohen's **It's Alive**, Brian de Palma's **Obsession** and the aforementioned **Taxi Driver**.

Herrmann's classical musical career was formed in the creative ferment that was New York in the 1920s and 30s. Experimentation and modernity in music was the order of the day and that enthralled a prodigious talent like Herrmann. His first steps into combining music with other media was as a music composer for radio where he met Orson Welles and along with Welles's theatre troupe the Mercury Theatre immediately explored the possibilities of the medium. They exploded the convention of the radio most magnificently with **The War of the Worlds** that Welles famously presented as a series of 'live' news reports from the site of the landed alien spaceship which interrupted a dance programme. Herrmann was conducting that orchestra as well as contributing atmospheric sounds to the reports of the alien invasion. The broadcast caused chaos in the states with some listeners convinced an alien invasion had happened and fleeing cities. It was responsible for strict rules about how news items were presented

This partnership led to Herrmann being recruited to score Welles first feature film that turned out to be the not inconsiderable **Citizen Kane**. Herrmann had arrived in the film world. From there he went onto being recognised as one of the greatest film composers if also one of the more volatile. Herrmann did not suffer fools gladly – equally, he was very clear that music in film was not just a supporting role.

A lot of filmmakers use music as a way of filling in for flaws that exist on screen, a way in effect of manipulating the audience. For Herrmann music was on a par with the image – both should be working together to amplify the meaning for the audience. This understanding was why he formed strong relationships with the like of Welles and Hitchcock. In **Vertigo**, for example – a film that at nearly two hours long has very little dialogue – Hitchcock knew that Herrmann's music would be co-creating the meaning. Indeed in the scene where Scottie sees the transformation of his object of desire Hitchcock said to Herrmann: "This is where your music does the talking."

Similarly, with **Psycho**. The story is that Hitchcock, who loved to experiment and give himself creative restrictions, was almost giving up on this low budget thriller. He was thinking about cutting it down to an hour TV slot. Herrmann said he would have a look at it whilst Hitchcock took a break. Hitchcock said yes but with one stipulation – the shower scene must remain silent apart from the sound of water. Herrmann said go enjoy your break. The rest is cinematic history.

Herrmann's creation of scores was also the stuff of experimentation. Psycho was unusually only for strings. In the science fiction film **The Day the Earth Stood Still** Herrmann created the ethereal otherworldly sounds using a pair of Theremins, an early form electronic instrument. Herrmann saw film – and indeed television, he scored the TV series The Twilight Zone – as a way of getting experimental music out to a wider audience without them even realising. Herrmann, a true innovator, recognised the potential of these popular mediums:

"Cinema and certainly the development of cinema is undoubtedly the most important artistic development of the twentieth century."

Herrmann railed against the cultural elite who looked down their noses at this creative form.

Whilst discovering the richness of this extraordinary figure I also realised that June 2011 marked the centenary of his birth. This moment and Herrmann's creative contribution had to be marked. We have put together a celebration of his work entitled **On Dangerous Ground: The Cinema of Bernard Herrmann**. We will be screening a selection of his films throughout June but also presenting a performance of **Herrmann and his Contemporaries** music at St Georges in Bristol. There are also events including Neil Brand demonstrating how Herrmann's music achieves the effect it does. We will also be publishing interview with musicians and composers online, and you can get more information on the Herrmann celebration at watershed.co.uk/herrmann.