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DEATH AND LOVE: BERNARD HERRMANN'S SCORE FOR *VERTIGO*

Abstract

Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's classic film *Vertigo* (1958) is a clear example of the composer's uncanny ability in translating the basic thematic premise of a film into a compact musical structure. The connection between love and death that is a central issue of *Vertigo* finds its musical counterpart in the derivation of the love motif and of two motifs associated with death from the same 'Primal cell' in the main title. The structure of the main title itself reflects this link by juxtaposing the basic motifs associated with death and love. To further illustrate the way Herrmann reinforces this connection, I will examine one of the key sequences of the film, in which the first four notes of one of the love motifs are subjected to a systematic process of transformation, which progressively eradicates the motif's original identity. The disintegration of the motif that is inscribed into the structure of this passage powerfully expresses a doomed—indeed, fatal—love.

Keywords: Bernard Herrmann, *Vertigo*, Hitchcock, Analysis, Film Score.

Resumen

La partitura musical de Bernard Herrmann para el film clásico *Vertigo* (1958), de Alfred Hitchcock, es un claro ejemplo de la extraordinaria habilidad de este compositor para traducir las premisas temáticas básicas de un film a una estructura musical compacta. La conexión entre amor y muerte, contenido central de *Vertigo*, encuentran su contraparte musical en la derivación del motivo asociado con el amor y de dos motivos asociados con la muerte desde los títulos principales en la misma 'Celula primaria.' La estructura de los títulos principales reflejan la conexión por medio de la yuxtaposición de los motivos básicos asociados con la muerte y con el amor. Para ilustrar la forma como Herrmann refuerza esta conexión, examinaré una de las escenas claves de este film en la cual las primeras cuatro notas de uno

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de los motivos asociados con el amor son sujetos a un proceso sistemático de transformación el cual erradica progresivamente la identidad original del motivo. La desintegración del motivo que está inscrito dentro de la estructura de este pasaje expresa un predestinado amor fatal.

Palabras clave: Bernard Herrmann, *Vertigo*, Hitchcock, análisis, partitura musical para film.

Since his death in 1975, Bernard Herrmann has emerged as one of the most respected and widely studied composers of film music. Steven Smith's excellent biography, *A Heart at Fire's Center*, as well as detailed analyses of Herrmann's film scores by Graham Bruce, Royal Brown, David Cooper and others have contributed to a growing body of literature on Herrmann that is complemented by a spate of new recordings of Herrmann film scores.

Herrmann's collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock has attracted special interest. His scores for *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960) have been the subject of extended studies by Cooper¹ and Fred Steiner.² *Vertigo*, in particular, has been analyzed at length by Cooper, Bruce, and others, and in the following essay I will not attempt to provide a complete overview of the score. Instead, I will focus on the way one of the central themes of the film, the link between love and death, is reflected in the musical design. After a brief plot summary of the film, I will examine the motivic material and the structural significance of the prelude.

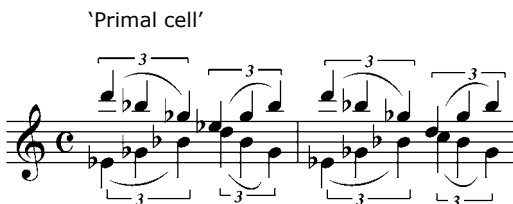
The protagonist of *Vertigo* is Scottie Ferguson, a detective who retires from the police force after witnessing a traumatic incident that induces a severe and permanent condition of acrophobia. Scottie is hired by his old friend Gavin Elster to follow Elster's wife, Madeleine, who is convinced that she is the reincarnation of her great-grandmother, Carlotta. Scottie becomes obsessed with Madeleine, and the two fall in love. Madeleine believes that she, like Carlotta, is fated to commit suicide, a premonition that seems to be fulfilled when Madeleine rushes up a bell tower and falls to her death (because of his acrophobia, Scottie is unable to save her).

In the second part of the film, Scottie meets Judy, a young woman who bears a striking similarity to Madeleine. Scottie, still obsessed with the image of Madeleine, pressures Judy to dress and

act like Madeleine. Unbeknown to Scottie, Judy and Madeleine are actually one and the same person –Judy was hired by Elster to impersonate Madeleine as part of Elster's elaborate plan to murder his wife and make it seem like suicide–. When Scottie discovers the plot, he is incensed and drags Judy up the same tower from whence Madeleine fell to her death. Judy slips and falls, and Scottie is left devastated and alone for the second time.

More than any other film by Alfred Hitchcock, *Vertigo* (1958) centers on the link between death and desire, between falling and falling in love. In the fabric of the film, love and vertigo, longing and fear are interwoven on even the most basic level of plot (without his acrophobia, Scottie would never have become a victim of Gavin Elster's diabolic plan; he would never have met Madeleine). As Robin Wood points out, Scottie's obsession with Madeleine is an obsession with Thanatos as much as Eros: "[Madeleine] is continually associated with death, and the fascination she exerts is the fascination of death, a drawing toward oblivion and final release; the yearning for the dream, for the Ideal, for the Infinite, become logically a yearning for death: Scottie's and our vertigo."³

There are five principal musical motifs in Herrmann's score for *Vertigo*. Three of them are associated with Scottie's acrophobia and his obsession with Madeleine; the remaining two reflect the split identity of Madeleine/Carlotta. The three motifs connected with Scottie are derived from the characteristic triplet figures in contrary motion that dominate the main title. For that reason, I have called it the 'Primal cell':



Example 1.

The first element derived from the 'Primal cell' is a motif that I call 'Pursuit.' A low, pulsating drone which conveys a sense of impending doom, it is a chromatically condensed diminution of the 'Primal cell':

Example 2.

'Pursuit' occurs three times in the course of the film: first during the rooftop chase, then as Scottie pursues Madeleine up the tower and finally in Judy's flash-back (each time preceding a death).

The second motif that grows out of the 'Primal cell' is a polychord (*D* major/*E_b* minor) linked with Scottie's acrophobia.⁴ Hence the label 'Vertigo' seems appropriate.

Example 3.

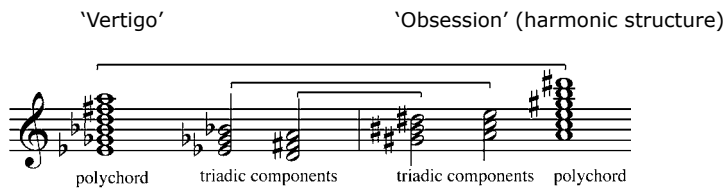
Note that the 'Vertigo' chord is a vertical presentation of the 'Primal cell.' Scored for high winds alternating with crashing low brass and percussion, it appears most frequently in conjunction with the effect Hitchcock devised to simulate the sensation of vertigo, a simultaneous back-track and zoom forward which is mirrored musically by wild harp glissandi in contrary motion.

The most important transformation of the 'Primal cell' is a motif associated with Scottie's obsessive passion for Madeleine. Herrmann employs it with particular frequency in the second half of the film, where it hauntingly evokes Scottie's loneliness and desolation after Madeleine's death. 'Obsession' is derived from the registral shape and intervallic structure of the 'Primal cell.' The 'Primal cell' ascends by thirds from *E_b* first to *D*, and then to *C*; 'Obsession' ascends by thirds from *E* to an appoggiatura *D* resolving to *C*.⁵



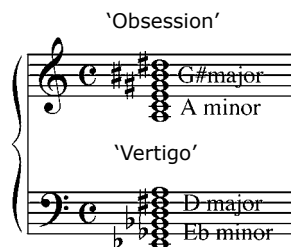
Example 4.

Although they sound very different, 'Vertigo' and 'Obsession' are closely related: the 'Vertigo' polychord (*D* major over *E_b* minor) consists of a superimposition of the triadic progression that underpins 'Obsession' (*A_b* major followed by *A* minor), arranged in thirds and transposed at the tritone (see example 5). Do these harmonic symmetries suggest love as the mirror image of death?



Example 5. *A_b* major is enharmonically respelled to reflect the tertian harmonic structure.

Finally, if we combine the harmonic content of the two motifs, they form symmetrical halves of an unbroken "tower" of thirds:



Example 6.

These motivic interconnections indicate the extent to which the structure of Herrmann's music, like that of the film, suggests a link between love and death. The two realms that Hitchcock connects on the level of plot and character, Herrmann connects on the level of motivic design by deriving the 'Obsession' motif and the two motifs associated with mortal danger and vertigo from the same 'Primal cell' in the prelude.⁶

The prelude serves not only as the gene pool of the music: it also mirrors in its binary structure the structure of the whole film.⁷ In the first two minutes, Herrmann 'tells' the story in a nutshell. The plot of the film divides into two sections of roughly equal length separated by a brief transition (a courtroom scene that follows Madeleine's death). The sections follow the same basic pattern. Both start with Scottie suffering an intensely traumatic experience connected with vertigo (the disastrous end of the rooftop chase, the vision of falling that haunts him in the nightmare). The main body of both sections is concerned with Scottie's passion for Madeleine (in the first part he falls in love with her, in the second, the process repeats itself as Judy transforms back into Madeleine). At the end of both sections, he is thrust back into solitude through the death of his beloved.

The prelude also divides into two sections. The first section opens with the 'Primal cell' (which is an arpeggiation of the 'Vertigo' chord minus A) played by frenzied strings and winds in 'vertiginous' contrary motion (which will evolve into the counterdirectional harp glissandi that accompany Scottie's attacks of acrophobia). Over this ostinato, trombones and horns introduce a falling major second, D to C, which will be incorporated into the 'Obsession' motif. First in unison, it is repeated with increasingly dissonant harmonies. Out of this chilling

introduction grows a tortured statement of the 'Obsession' motif that condenses in 15 measures all the passion that Scottie will lavish on Madeleine. It is cut short by a shattering augmented chord consisting of *Bb*, *D* and *F#* –the exact notes which constitute the core of the 'Primal cell' and the 'Vertigo' polychord–. Thus, Herrmann foreshadows Madeleine's death. The second section is a slightly varied repetition of the first, again concluding on the same augmented chord. Like the film, the prelude is a double spiral of fear, longing and devastation.

The two motifs that have no direct connection to the prelude's 'Primal cell' are associated with the object of Scottie's desire: one reflects Madeleine herself, that beautiful, elusive construct impersonated by Judy Barton, and the other evokes the even more illusory specter of that construct's ghostly ancestor, Carlotta.

The delicate motif that Herrmann conceived for Madeleine is conspicuously open-ended. It consists of reams of eighth notes that perpetually generate movement without ever coming to a definite conclusion –quite appropriate to the character, who at one point describes herself as a 'wanderer' without a goal–:

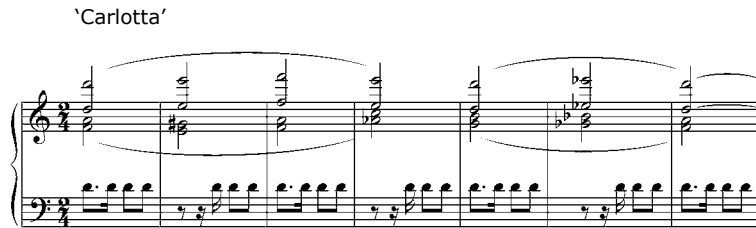
'Madeleine'

Example 7.

It is worth noting that the lushly romantic climax of the motif's first statement, which accompanies Scottie's initial encounter with Madeleine at 'Ernie's,' fades into the same augmented chord (*Bb*, *D*, *F#*) that concludes both statements of 'Obsession' in the prelude. From the start, Herrmann indicates that this relationship is doomed.

The motif associated with the mysterious Carlotta Valdez is as unsettlingly static as 'Madeleine' is propulsive. It is based on an

ostinato *Habanera* rhythm (since Bizet's *Carmen* a standard device for adding a Spanish flavor) on the note D, which has already been established in the prelude as the melodic focal point of 'Obsession.' D signifies both Scottie's obsession with Madeleine and Madeleine's obsession with Carlotta. It serves as yet another link between love and death. As a harbinger of madness or death, the 'Carlotta' motif permeates the entire score.



Example 8.

Like the motifs derived from the 'Primal cell,' 'Carlotta' and 'Madeleine' represent the fundamental theme of *Vertigo*: the connection between love and death. If 'Madeleine' represents the object of Scottie's desire, 'Carlotta' represents its destruction.

Perhaps the most explicit musical depiction of the process by which longing merges with death occurs during the pivotal point of *Vertigo*: the first sequence at the Spanish mission (accompanied by two adjacent cues: "Farewell" and "The Tower"). This sequence, which culminates in Madeleine's death, marks the first climax of the film and concludes its first half. It is the point at which all elements of the story introduced so far are converging with fateful inevitability. The mission that Madeleine saw in her dream has become reality; Carlotta's past superimposes itself inexorably on Madeleine's present; Scottie's passion for Madeleine collides with the vertigo that makes it impossible for him to prevent her death. This is the moment when the puzzle of Elster's constructed reality is completed, when all elements are blended into one continuous fabric of past and present, dream and reality, love and obliteration. At this juncture, just as the lovers are about to lose each other, Herrmann juxtaposes the motif that represents Scottie's obsession with Madeleine's motif. This

integration, however, is not an apotheosis, not a consummation of their love. Rather, the four sections into which the ensuing build-up divides trace an irreversible process of loss. The first section opens with a vibrant statement of the 'Obsession' motif:



Example 9. Section 1.

A brief transition leads to the second section, a full-throated augmentation of Madeleine's theme:



Example 10. Section 2.

Whereas Madeleine's motif previously appeared only by itself, it is now tantalizingly tied into the same thematic context as the 'Obsession' motif, promising a permanent union between the lovers. But the increasingly agitated third section obliterates this prospect: it begins with a rhythmically varied diminution of Madeleine's motif which, in the course of the next 14 measures, undergoes a process of gradual metamorphosis, of thematic evaporation. Sequential reshufflings of the first four notes of the motif progressively eradicate its original identity until it has transformed into a chromatically compressed inversion:

reiteration of 'Obsession,' which in its own shape reflects the whole frustrating process in miniature. The registral outline of this extraordinary passage, and the disintegration of Madeleine's motif that is inscribed into its structure, powerfully express a doomed love.

Herrmann's extraordinary skill in translating the essential theme of film into a compact musical structure is evident. The connection between love and death that is a central issue of *Vertigo* finds its musical counterpart in the derivation of the 'Obsession' motif and of two motifs associated with death from the same 'Primal cell' in the prelude. Royal Brown writes that through Herrmann, "Hitchcock... was lucky enough to get music that expressed in its own aesthetic terms what the filmic style was expressing in its particular manner."⁸ The result is a cinemusal amalgam of such explosive effectiveness Herrmann could justly claim, "Hitchcock only finishes a picture 60%. I have to finish it for him."⁹

NOTES

¹ David Cooper, *Bernard Herrmann's Vertigo: A Film Score Handbook*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

² Fred Steiner, "Herrmann's 'Black and White' Music for Hitchcock's *Psycho*," *Elmer Bernstein's Film Music Collection* vol 1 (Fall 1974).

³ Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989) 118.

⁴ The derivation of the polychord from the main title is discussed in detail by Graham Bruce, in Graham Bruce, *Bernard Herrmann: Film Music and Narrative* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985) 139-142.

⁵ Notice the emphasis given to the note *D*, not only as an appoggiatura over the underlying *Ab* major chord but also as the highest and longest note of the phrase. Its perpetual recurrence, both in this and other contexts, establishes *D* as the score's 'Obsessive' note, to borrow a phrase from Alan Jay Quantrell. in Alan Jay Quantrell. Notes. *Vertigo* soundtrack. Mercury Golden Imports, SRI 75117.

⁶ I am not suggesting that this was necessarily a conscious process –many composers, including Wagner, have testified to the power of artistic intuition in the unconscious creation of complex relationships–.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the structure of the prelude, see Cooper 36–39.

⁸ Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) 173.

⁹ Brown 290.

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