

Suite from *Psycho*

Bernard Herrmann (1911-1975)

One of the great film composers from the golden age of Hollywood, Bernard Herrmann, was also one of the first to create a personally distinctive sound. Winning a composition prize at the age of 13, he went on to study with Percy Grainger at New York University. Later, Herrmann joined CBS Studios where he became chief conductor and composer, going on to write music for Orson Welles' radio programs and early films, including *Citizen Kane*. Herrmann was especially known for his use of orchestral color, even using a theremin, a unique electronic instrument played by waving one's hands, in his score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

Herrmann was especially known for his collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock, scoring *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *The Birds* among other films. For *Psycho*, he decided to feature only string instruments, wanting a "black and white" sound to reflect the black and white palette of the movie. Interestingly, Hitchcock originally wanted no music for the famous shower scene. Herrmann, however, believed otherwise and secretly wrote a cue using the iconic screeching violins. At the recording session for the film, Hitchcock listened with approval to the entire score, soon regretting not having asked for music for that scene. Only then did Herrmann reveal that he had written music for it, and Hitchcock, after watching the scene with the extra cue, immediately agreed the additional music was perfect.

Suite from *Us*

Michael Abels (b. 1962)

Michael Abels, a popular African American composer, is especially adept at all things orchestral and often fuses classical traditions with contemporary idioms like hip-hop. Abels has received grants from the prestigious Sphinx Organization and his traditional concert pieces have been performed by major orchestras including the Chicago and Atlanta symphonies. One of his most celebrated pieces is *Global Warming*, a work that reflects both a specific event, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, and the general commonalities in folk music from all cultures, which Abels believes can be powerful tools in bringing nations together.

For many, Abels' greatest success has come with film music including the score for *Us*, a psychological horror film by Jordan Peele, released in 2019. The film relates the discovery that everyone in town has been cloned and those doppelgängers are now seeking revenge. The score features nearly every creepy string effect a player can make, including ponticello, tremolo, random glissandos, and pizzicato. Also heard in the score is a choir singing nonsensical syllables which sound vaguely like a language but one only "they" can understand, adding to the suspense and menace.

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

James M. Stephenson (b. 1969)

A degree in trumpet performance from New England Conservatory helped launch James Stephenson's career as a professional orchestral player. Thus, it is no surprise that he has approached his composing

with special attention to playability. His affinity for orchestral musicians has also led Stephenson to write concertos for almost every instrument found in a modern orchestra. He has received commissions from numerous organizations including the San Francisco Ballet, University of Minnesota, and the “President’s Own” Marine Band. A notable example of Stephenson’s chamber music output is *The Devil’s Tale*, a 2013 sequel to Stravinsky’s *A Soldier’s Tale*, which is filled with palindromes and has been performed at prestigious venues such as Ravinia and the Kennedy Center.

One of Stephenson’s earliest compositions, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, was commissioned by the Naples Philharmonic in 1996. This evocative tone poem, based on the grisly story by Washington Irving, tells the tale of schoolmaster Ichabod Crane and the lovely Katrina van Tassel with whom he has fallen in love. Unfortunately, she declines his advances sending him on his terrifying journey through the forest. Included in the score are hymns and folk tunes popular in the Hudson River Valley, adding authenticity to the narration. Tonight’s performance will be the chamber orchestra version which was commissioned by the Cincinnati Pops.

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

First impressions are always fascinating to a writer of program notes and this work certainly has plenty of great examples. Mendelssohn heard *Symphonie fantastique* shortly after its premier in 1830 and found it “utterly loathsome” and “unspeakably dreadful . . . I have not been able to work for two days.” Rossini, after looking at the score, remarked “what a good thing it isn’t music.” Fortunately, orchestras continued to give it a go and the world has learned to appreciate *Symphonie fantastique*.

The piece is revolutionary in significant ways and is considered one of the most important works for orchestra. To begin with, it is one of the earliest works to have a program or story associated with the music. In 1827 Berlioz had attended a performance of *Hamlet* and fell deeply in love with Harriet Smithson, the actress who played Ophelia. When several love letters failed to entice her, he began composing the symphony to express his growing obsession with her. Because the piece explores such a wide variety of emotions, Berlioz wrote a detailed explanation of each movement.

Another innovative aspect is the use of a recurring melody in each movement, which Berlioz called his “idée fixe” and represented his lust for Harriet. The theme is transformed by the changing drama and emotions of each movement and helps the listener along the journey. The orchestration is also avant-garde, featuring instruments that were not part of the typical orchestra of the period: piccolo, English horn, cornets, two harps, and (most unusual) two ophicleides. Even some of the directions to the strings are unusual. For example, in the 5th movement they are asked to play “col legno” – with the wood of the bow instead of the horsehair.

Finally, one must acknowledge this work’s psychedelic, dream-like aspects. Most notable are those found in the 4th movement, in which the artist dreams about being executed and then watches his head bounce down the steps of the guillotine; and in the 5th movement, which is a wild, bizarre dance of witches and magical creatures and features the plainchant Dies Irae “Day of Wrath”. All those striking, psychedelic sounds are not surprising considering Berlioz was using opium while he composed!