

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

on

MUSIC IN FILMS

In an Interview with
STEPHEN WATTS

WHEN THE British student of intelligent cinema turns to survey the creative side of film-making in his own country the names available for reference are pathetically few. Even ranging over the whole of the talkie's short history he can probably produce a bare half-dozen, say (alphabetically for safety!) Asquith, Dupont, Grierson, Hitchcock, Korda, and Saville, and only the two last-named of these can be regarded, at the moment, as contributors to the ordinary cinema.

But the arrival of *Waltzes from Vienna* and the news that he has joined the Gaumont-British organization bring back to prominence the name of Alfred Hitchcock.

His return to active direction is almost accidental. After his term as production supervisor at British International—a regrettable, fallow period for the keen intelligence which gave us *Blackmail* and *Murder*—and his signing a contract for Korda, he was approached by Tom Arnold, the theatrical manager, to supervise the filming of *Waltzes from Vienna*. The step from that to actually directing it was taken because the subject interested Hitchcock so much.

It sounds strange that the most unremittingly cinematic of our directors, the realist and humanist, Hitchcock, should undertake what seemed like simply the rendering into celluloid of a stage musical success.

The clue is in that word “musical”. He saw here a chance to do two things: to try out some of his ideas about the relation of music to the film, and try to prove that a film that *is* a film can be created out of a ready-made theatre subject.

It was of these beliefs and theories about music and the film that Hitchcock talked to me, illustrating his points with instances from the film he was then busily engaged on cutting.

“The arrival of talkies, as you know, temporarily killed action in pictures,” he began, “but it did just as much damage to music.

Producers and directors were obsessed by words. They forgot that one of the greatest emotional factors in the silent cinema was the musical accompaniment. They have gradually realized that action should still come first—that, talkies or not, they are still making motion pictures. But music as an artistic asset of the film is still sadly neglected.

“I was greatly interested in music and films in the silent days and I have always believed that the coming of sound opened up a great new opportunity. The accompanying music came at last entirely under the control of the people who made the picture. That was surely an advance on having a separate score played by cinema orchestras. The tremendous advantage of a film being musically accompanied had been demonstrated by ‘silents’ like *Ben Hur* and *Way Down East*. Yet when it became possible to blend film and music together in an artistic entity the opportunity was overlooked, or at least left undeveloped.

“The result is that the only dramatic use of music in talkies—leaving out of account the ‘musicals’ which interpolate ‘numbers’ rather than employ music—is the crude instance of slow music for love scenes. Anything else has been an odd stunt and not a properly worked out scheme.

“But that conventional soft music is the basis of the right idea—expressing the mood of the scene. It is an elementary application of it.”

“Do you believe, then, that every film should have a complete musical score before it goes into production?” I asked.

“I do,” Hitchcock replied emphatically. “Though by ‘complete’ I do not mean continuous. That would be monotonous. Silence is often very effective and its effect is heightened by the proper handling of the music before and after.

“There is, somewhere, the correct musical accompaniment for almost any scene—music which will improve the scene. But none at all is better than the wrong music.”

“But how would you relate music and action? What would you say was the underlying purpose of all film-music? Can you give me an example?” I asked.

“Well, the first and obvious use is atmospheric. To create excitement. To heighten tensivity. In a scene of action, for instance, when the aim is to build up to a physical climax, music adds excitement just as effectively as cutting—but I shall have more to say about that comparison later. Music can also be a background to a scene in any mood and a commentary on dialogue, but, frankly, I have not yet made up my mind about the function of music in relation to dialogue in general. I can only give specific instances where I think it might be profitably used.”

“Surely the trouble there,” I suggested, “is that an audience cannot listen to and appreciate both words and the musical background at the same time?”

“Partly that. But not entirely. I might argue that I do not want the audience to listen consciously to the music at all. It might be achieving its desired effect without the audience being aware of how that effect was being achieved.

“No. The problem goes deeper than that. Music with certain types of dialogue might be made to achieve a great deal, and here I can give you an apt illustration from *Waltzes from Vienna*.

“There is a dialogue scene between a young man and a woman. It is a quiet, tender scene. But the woman’s husband is on his way. The obvious way to get suspense is to cut every now and then to glimpses of the husband travelling towards the house. In the silent days, when the villain was coming, you always had the orchestra playing quickening music. You *felt* the menace. Well, you can still have that and keep the sense of the talk-scene going as well. And the result is that you don’t need to insist pictorially on the husband’s approach.

“I think I used about six feet of film out of the three hundred feet used in the sequence to flash to the husband. The feeling of approaching climax can be suggested by the music.

“It is in that psychological use of music, which, you will observe, they knew something about before talkies, that the great possibilities lie.

“It makes it possible to express the unspoken. For instance, two people may be saying one thing and thinking something very different. Their looks match their words, not their thoughts. They may be talking politely and quietly, but there may be a storm coming. You cannot express the mood of that situation by word and photograph. But I think you could get at the underlying idea with the right background music. It may sound far-fetched to compare a dramatic talkie with opera, but there is something in common. In opera quite frequently the music echoes the words that have just been spoken. That is one way music with dialogue can be used.

“*Waltzes from Vienna* gave me many opportunities for working out ideas in the relation of film and music. Naturally every cut in the film was worked out on script before shooting began. But more than that, the musical cuts were worked out too.

“Let me give you an example. As you probably know, *Waltzes from Vienna* tells the story of the conception, composition, and first performance of “The Blue Danube.” Obviously there has to be a long musical sequence when the piece is first played in public—one of the big scenes of the picture. In what I have been saying about music in films I have supposed the action to be the inspiration of

the music. But in this case the music had to inspire the action. All the camera has to work with is the orchestra, the conductor, and the audience. The human angle is the conductor—the younger Strauss—and the people of the story who are listening. So I arranged the cutting to match the rhythm of the music. It is difficult to describe in words. You must visualize the film moving in time with the music. In the slow passages the cutting is slow, when the music quickens the mood of the melody is followed by the quick cutting.

“Then, again, there is a good instance of the sort of thing I have aimed at in the scene when Strauss, a young baker, conceives the tune while at work. There the action—composed of simple things like bakers kneading dough and rolls falling into baskets—moves in time with the music which is forming in the young man’s brain.

“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.”

“You think then that cutting, montage, or whatever you like to call it, cannot do all that is required to establish the mood of a film, Mr. Hitchcock?”

“Exactly. 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 have you noticed that since they started to make quieter subjects, concerned with agriculture, etc., their montage has not been so noticeable or effective? 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.

“Please make it clear that I am not laying down laws on this subject. I am simply experimenting in theory as I have done in practice in *Waltzes from Vienna*. There are lots of things I have not made up my mind about. But I do think that any intelligent attempt to harness music to films is a step forward. Words and incidental noises and ‘song numbers’ are surely not all the sound track was invented for.

“The basis of the cinema’s appeal is emotional. Music’s appeal is to a great extent emotional, too. To neglect music, I think, is to surrender, wilfully or not, a chance of progress in film-making.”