

Review of “Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* Live Orchestra” (Milan, Fondazione Cariplo Auditorium, March 11, 2023). Orchestra Sinfonica Giovanile di Milano conducted by Anthony Gabriele.

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Alfred Hitchcock’s “*Psycho* Live” was presented on March 11, 2023, at the Fondazione Cariplo Auditorium in Milan. The film was projected on a regular screen, while the soundtrack was reduced to voices and “sound”. Bernard Herrmann’s written musical score was played “live,” which means that a string orchestra accompanied the film while on screen. The formula is not new, dating back to 2013. FilmConcertsLive is one of the brands designing popular, invigorating performances of blockbuster movies from the 1980s on. Similar shows are presented in big concert halls all around the world. The Milan Auditorium is not new to this type of approach. This kind of presentation of “*Psycho* Live” has been around in North American and English movie theaters and concert halls for at least ten years. What differentiates “*Psycho* Live” from “*Titanic* Live,” “*West Side Story* Live,” or even “*Vertigo* Live,” is the sheer nature of short interludes of intensity in this black and white Hitchcock’s 1960 film. *Psycho* becomes alive in contemporary art; it has been remade in color by Gus Van Sant and stretched to 24 hours in the famous Douglas Gordon video installation. More than a myth, *Psycho* is an object. An agglomeration of objects that become fetish: women’s bras, car mirrors, sunglasses, and shower curtains. The 1960s pop aura in the first part of the movie is taken over by a context of the surroundings in the second part, such as the gothic interiors of the Bates house. This includes the Mother’s mummified body and the last appearance of Norman Bates disguised as the Mother in the famous Whistler painting.

If you disentangle such a crucial movie, you must consider that every element has a special value— something similar to the Callas Live presentations.¹ It’s an intervention of flagrant music (classical or modern classical music) on archetypal icons of black and white modernity. With *Psycho* becoming a modern opera (before Milan, it was presented the day before at the Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo), the spectators are cheered by an apparent new life infused into the old prototype. The hall was fully booked despite the tickets’ high cost (compared to the cost of a DVD or online streaming).

1 See the comprehensive account written by João Pedro Cachopo, “Callas and the Hologram: A Live Concert with a Dead Diva,” *Sound Stage Screen* 2, no. 1 (2022): 5–29.

Looking at the audience, I had the impression from most of them—especially the younger audience, which was high in attendance—that it was the first time they had been to a “semi-traditional” concert. However, in engaging an audience that is familiar with each frame and note, “*Psycho Live*” presents itself as a performance of a repertoire opera (such as Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, or Verdi’s *La traviata*, or Puccini’s *Tosca*) where each spectator faces the following conflict: “If I know everything, how can I keep my attention alive?”

The film flows organically and at the same time the audience’s expectations gain more and more sophisticated standards of evaluation, addressing the attention to the crossing intersections of the audiovisual system. First of all, you realize that you cannot create a breaking point between “music soundtrack” and “soundtrack” at all. “*Psycho Live*” reinforces the number of strings in the orchestra to create a louder volume for Herrmann’s score (in comparison to the music recorded in the movie). This creates an imbalance with all the remaining sounds: voices, noises, which are not less determining for the peculiar reality effect of the film.

Take the example of the Love Scene in *Vertigo*. The famous music by Bernard Herrmann interprets the moments when Scottie (James Stewart) waits for the arrival of Judy/Madeleine (Kim Novak): her appearances—albeit wrapped in musical, Wagnerian notes—are underscored and, in a way, made more “real” by the simple sound of opening doors, first from the elevator and later from the bathroom. During the *Psycho* shower scene, the musical scratch of the strings colludes and harmonizes with the water noises and the screams, creating an equivalent of the brutal, deadly shock of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh).

If everything contributes to the audio-visual effect, the decision to emphasize the musical score because it is “written” and it is playable as “high-brow” music, looks ingenuous. During “*Psycho Live*,” I frequently had the impression of losing the meaning of spoken words, of losing “something” of the logical plot, in favor of the music’s emotional aura.

This version of *Psycho* reaches a spectacular impact, not based on surprise but on the accepted rules of a rite. We were seated for 90 minutes to celebrate the prominence of Western visuality. The last frame of the shower scene, with Janet Leigh stretching her right arm towards the audience looking for help, becomes “absolute” as were the faces of the Odessa protesters fighting against the Czarist soldiers in the famous shots from *Battleship Potemkin* by Sergej Ėjzenštejn. What we memorized as a scream (the 1925 movie was silent, yet the advertisements claimed that “an Ėjzenštejn movie

is like a scream”) relives in the final, silent acceptance of the fate of poor Marion Crane, so intense has been the cross performance of live music—with all the uncertainties of the “possible”—and well known and beloved sound and frames.²

In “*Psycho Live*”, as in every similar experiment with celebrated movies, the viewers have the great chance to predetermine most of their reactions, like when they press a title from the playlist on their smartphone and listen through earphones, walking or traveling or simply doing something “normal” which can become “special.” It is totally different from the transformation of old movies into opera (the Cocteau trilogy) or the sonorization of Tod Browning’s *Dracula*, both made by Philip Glass with his original music, performed live during the 1990s and presented at the same Auditorium of Milan.

Personally, I am developing a proposal conceived with a young musician from Melegnano (Milan), Matteo Monico. It is called “Hitchcock’s Ballads,” and it consists of the performance of the entire musical score reduced for piano. Imagine a concert, a true—I mean, traditional—concert. The pianist enters, gets the applause, sits at the piano, and plays all Herrmann’s score for *Psycho*. There are no screen, no voices, no images at all. The task of visualizing the movie is left to the audience’s memory. Playing music, the pianist evokes a plot. He knows *Psycho* as we know, as the public of “*Psycho Live*” does. But here the audience is provoked, since the risk margin—of getting ourselves lost—is much bigger. As a spectator, I can forget at which point the pianist entered: so, what I can do? Do I leave myself to the music? Wait for another signal? “There I am, this is the shower scene! Ok, so now the second half of the movie starts.”

From the magnitude of “*Psycho Live*” to the intimacy of “Hitchcock’s Ballads,” the same music echoes in us. The more we feel the complexity of the matter, the more we are able to perform and interpret a movie, getting to the core of extreme issues. In front of a ubiquitous *Psycho*, the responsibility is to memorize our own *Psycho*, as do the rebels of *Fahrenheit 451* when they each learn, word by word, an entire book to contrast a dictatorship engaged in the erasing of written memory.

2 A modern evaluation of Èjzenštejn’s masterwork cannot ignore neither the role of the score written by Edmund Meisel nor the flamboyant gay identity of the Russian movie director.

Giacomo Agosti studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. He has been teaching Visual Culture and Performing Arts at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milano since 1989. During the years he has worked with artists in emotional and sensorial terms. His main focus fell upon three main themes: American music, stereoscopic vision (historical 3D), and Italian movies color. He presented sound installations based on operas (from main repertoire and otherwise) at Museo del 900, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Museo Nazionale in Naples, and on Comacina Island (Lake of Como). In 2013, he stage-directed the first modern revival of Nicolas Dalayrac's *Les deux petits savoyards*, with the Milano Classica Orchestra conducted by Gianluca Capuano. In 2003, he founded the Association Il Nuovo Mondo, which promotes the music of the 20th century as well as exchanges with Chinese artists from overseas. He contributes to the website <artecrit.com>. He is currently completing a book titled *L'Isola delle sirene. Cultura omosessuale e musical americano da Busby Berkeley a Betty Grable* (Ricordi-LIM, "Le Sfere" series, forthcoming).

