

the band played on: a tiomkin trio

If Dimitri hadn't become a composer, he would have been a maître d'hôtel.

—Olivia Tiomkin

MUSICAL CRISSCROSS: *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*

In *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock struggles aboard a train with a double bass, an instrument nearly as big as he is. The last film in which he had used a string instrument for a cameo was *The Paradine Case*, the first in a series of fascinating flops that had continued right up to this picture. Now he was back in form, with a tight, sensational thriller that reconnected him with his audience.

Strangers on a Train was the first of three consecutive collaborations with Dimitri Tiomkin, who had not worked with Hitchcock since *Shadow of a Doubt*. With eerie exactitude, Tiomkin picked up where he'd left off a decade earlier, finding a new design for Hitchcock's continuing obsession with doubles and identity transferences. Tiomkin's vivid colors, brassy sonorities, and preference for brashness over refinement fit the tone of the film, a crack of emotional thunder after the cerebral attenuations of *Rope*, *Under Capricorn*, and *Stage Fright*. Like Stephen Sondheim, who also invested a popular genre with classical rigors, Hitchcock suffered numerous crushing setbacks, yet he always picked himself up and moved on to the next project, even as the current one was metastasizing.

Right from the beginning, Tiomkin's lavish main title gives *Strangers on a Train* a special seductiveness. The piece is scored for a large orchestra, including alto, tenor, and baritone sax; three clarinets, four horns, three pianos, and a novachord. (Although the arranger is listed as George Parrish, the instruments are penciled into the score by the composer.)¹ The title music vividly introduces several of the numerous themes we are to enjoy throughout the movie, including queasy motifs associated with Bruno and an elaborate, swooning violin tune for Guy and Ann, the beleaguered couple whose romance is spoiled first by Guy's emasculating wife, Miriam, who refuses a divorce, then by Robert Walker's Bruno, the most formidable Hitchcock villain since Joseph Cotten's Uncle Charlie, who handily solves the divorce problem with a murderous Faustian bargain to which Guy unknowingly (subconsciously?) assents.



Strangers on a Train. Musical cameo.

Throughout the film, Tiomkin sounds the theme of “crisscross,” the term used by Bruno to describe his insidious homicide-exchange. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock contented himself with a single waltz subjected to Tiomkin’s ingenious transformations. A far richer score, *Strangers* uses crisscrossing motifs organized into nine medleys, some packed with as many as six ideas.

As with *Psycho* a decade later, Hitchcock poured more music into the film than he originally intended. Some of the most powerful cues—the careening carousel, the unwrapping of Guy’s gun, the awesomely quiet demise of Bruno—do not appear on the cue sheet. The first shot—two sets of male shoes, loud versus conservative, moving toward a train—carries a gruff bass motif set against Gershwin-like riffs, a two-part medley called “Strangers” and “Walking” that (typifying the profligacy of the score) is never heard again.² Hitchcock strikes a note of comedy: vulgar versus fashionably formal shoes are a witty synecdoche representing two worlds. As in *Frenzy*, he does not tip us off that this will be one of his darker films; instead he uses music to deceive us.

For “Guy’s Theme,” Tiomkin created a hesitant, passive idea, made-to-order music for Farley Granger’s performance, about which Hitchcock famously complained in his interview with Truffaut. (William Holden, the director said, would have made a stronger Guy.) Tiomkin apparently assumed that Granger’s acting style was in sync with the shaky ambivalence that defines his character. “Had Hitchcock expressed to Tiomkin his reservations about Granger’s performance,” writes Christopher Palmer, “the composer could have strengthened the actor musically.”³ Despite this lack of communication, the score precisely follows Guy’s development. In the exposition, he is blocked, frustrated, passively furious; in the heart-stopping tennis and carnival scenes where Guy jettisons his ambivalence and becomes a proper hero, the tempo of the theme quickens, its harmony and orchestration become brighter and more decisive. Guy’s motto often carries a mocking irony, as when Ann first notices the “Bruno” tie, implying Bruno’s charming effect on women, and when Guy slugs Bruno in the jaw, a kind of lover’s spat to please the many viewers who find homoerotic subcurrents in their decidedly peculiar relationship.

Harmonic complexity defines the motifs associated with Bruno: rumbling bass, shocking clusters, and glassy string harmonics. These disturbing sounds, heard to superb effect in cues such as “The Meeting,” “Senator’s Office,” and “Jefferson Memorial,” are not just about Bruno but about how he is perceived by those whose lives he crosses—first Guy, then everyone in Guy’s entourage. When Guy takes out a gun and prepares to enter Bruno’s

house, Bruno's creepy harmonics crisscross over to him; suddenly he has become the scary one. Hitchcock's tilted camera watches him ascend an expressionist staircase complete with a great, snarling dog at the top—Hitchcock's highest Gothicism since *Rebecca*. Entitled "Menace," this malevolent cue follows all the suspense rules until Guy is standing at the door of Bruno's father; suddenly, dissonant fragments broaden into a fateful brass chorale, the moment of truth signaling Bruno's decision to regard Guy's fake crisscross as a fatal double cross. The most horrific sounding of Bruno's music is a cluster exploding in "Mother and Bruno" and "St. Francis" (the kind of uncompromising modernism Tiomkin delivers in Howard Hawks's *Thing from Another World*). Again, the music is not just about Bruno but about his larger reality, in this case, his malignant family.

Most memorable is the simplest of Hitchcock's many waltzes, a carnival organ blaring "The Band Played On," sometimes alternating with other carnival tunes like "Carolina in the Morning," "Oh, You Beautiful Doll," and "Baby Face" (songs chosen by Tiomkin). This strangely unsettling melody sets up the movie's most elaborate transferences. I'll commit your murder if you'll commit mine, Bruno tells Guy on the train, flattering him as an adoring tennis fan; I'll do in your heinous wife if you'll do the same for my hateful father: "some people," he says matter-of-factly, echoing the amoral young men in *Rope*, "are better off dead." An interesting nut, thinks Guy, blandly agreeing with the scheme to get Bruno off his back. But in Hitchcock, the fantastical has a way of becoming real; Bruno's reality as Guy's alter ego who enacts his darkest fantasies is established by real music, "The Band Played On" wafting eerily from across the pond when he emerges from the carnival shadows to kill Guy's wife.

This is an early sounding of an American Gothic trope, one borrowed from the German expressionist tradition in which Hitchcock was immersed: the amusement park as nightmare. (A decade later, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* would present Ray Bradbury's carnival story "The Jar"; this time the creepy carousel music would be by Bernard Herrmann.) In one of Hitchcock's most explicit operatic gestures, the characters at the fateful carnival sing the score, giving it full dimension as part of the drama. In a conventional movie, the tune would play in the background as a clever ironic backdrop. But Hitchcock takes music to another level. Miriam and the two boyfriends in her odd menage a trois bring "The Band Played On" to life by singing it on the merry-go-round, lustily and loudly. (This was the only time that Laura Eliot, who played Miriam, ever sang in a movie.) Grinning balefully on the horse behind them, Bruno then sings it himself, making it his motto. The band plays on through Bruno's stalking of his victim and during the murder itself, blaring from the front of the screen, then receding into the darkness as an eerie obbligato when the doomed Miriam enters the Tunnel of Love. Although it becomes Bruno's leitmotif, Miriam sings it first, telegraphing her fate in the lyric "the poor girl would shake with alarm," the film's most unsettling crisscross. Unlike his distortion of "The Merry Widow," Hitchcock allows this waltz to play on unembellished, with terrifying indifference, as we watch Bruno strangle Miriam in a reflection through her shattered glasses.

The most elaborate crisscross involves the subconscious. In a pair of surreal scenes, Barbara, played with blunt charm by Hitchcock's daughter Pat, peers deeply into Bruno's eyes, which glower malevolently at her glasses; these mysteriously beam forth a flame from the nocturnal strangling, accompanied by "The Band Played On." The script reveals scrupulous planning:

From Bruno's viewpoint, as Barbara speaks, CAMERA MOVES IN CLOSER until the faintest impression of the merry-go-round fills the screen with the effect of whirling around Barbara's head. Her glasses seem to glint until her eyes are obliterated by the glare. All talk dies out as all eyes turn to Bruno, who is staring at Barbara. Except Ann's who is saying quietly to Bruno: This is my sister Barbara. Barbara, this is Mr. Anthony.

CLOSEUP BRUNO He does not acknowledge the introduction immediately. He is still staring at Barbara. Then he nods abstractedly.
CLOSEUP ANN She is looking at Bruno, wondering what mystery lies behind this strange individual and why he and Guy have disclaimed any previous acquaintance.

Once the music was laid in, the mystery was elucidated, at least for the audience. "The Band Played On" creates the effect of whirling that binds the murder with Bruno and Barbara's trancelike communication.

In another doubling, those who are delightfully mortified by this scene get to experience it again. This time Barbara watches Bruno nearly strangle a spoiled society lady at a party:

Her glasses glint in the light.... [Bruno] is now transfixed. His breathing becomes heavy. A strange expression comes over his face. He still stares off at Barbara. Medium shot Barbara: we see the whirling merry-go-round spinning around her head.... [Bruno] now seems to have almost gone into a trance. Over the shot we begin to hear a strangled cry.

This time Barbara gets it: "His hands were on her throat, and he was strangling me," she tells Ann. "He went into sort of a trance." At this chilling moment, "The Band Plays On" crisscrosses from the carousel organ into Tiomkin's full orchestra, now part of the underscore. This musical telepathy recalls *Shadow of a Doubt*, though here the psychic transfer involves a vision as well as a waltz. The scene is not actually supernatural, of course. Like Poe, Hitchcock favored the illusion of the supernatural: the music and cigarette lighter emerge from Bruno's weird mind,

not from Barbara's glasses. As in *Rebecca* and *Family Plot*, music suggests the paranormal, though the scene is psychological.

Throughout the film, the crisscross design becomes more ornate. Rapid pizzicato, a Tchaikovskian variation on "Guy and Ann," follows Guy through his nerve-wracking tennis match, the outcome of which determines his guilt or innocence; a more dizzying variation leads into a dancelike race through a train station, always one of Hitchcock's favorite ballet stages. Intercut with these delicate sounds is "Cigarette Case," a cue whose growling Bartókian brass slides depict Bruno's frantic attempts to extricate Guy's incriminating cigarette lighter from a street grate. "The intercutting," says Olivia Tiomkin, "switches from one man's theme to another," resulting in "the balancing of the two characters."⁴ Here is one of the most dynamic examples in a Hitchcock film of music not only depicting an idea but standing in for characters.

Some cues are so swift and witty that they make sense only on a second viewing. The scene in Miller's Music Store is a complex medley of piano tunings, the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and pop songs like "Keep Cool Fool" and "Don't Cry Baby," all a sardonic foil for Guy's bitter fight with Miriam: played for a fool, Guy fails to keep cool, and Miriam unleashes sarcasm without tears. Another dynamic musical contest consists of a medley in which Guy's frantic "Train" cue alternates with "Ain't She Sweet," "Baby Face," "Ain't We Got Fun," and, of course, "The Band Played On." The cacophony continues as Bruno waits for darkness, then spins out of control as the merry-go-round collapses in flying metal and gunfire, a carny Gotterdammerung crushing the score's themes into its wreckage.

At the end, "Bruno's Death" is dignified by somber Mussorgskian chimes, a quiet forecast of *Dial M for Murder*, as the tireless Bruno tries in his last gasp to transfer his guilt to Guy. In the coda, the love theme loses its ambiguity, rising in splendor for a proper cadence as Guy and Ann flee from a priest on a train who utters Bruno's opening lines—a final, wicked transference. In the last variation on the love theme, the coming together of the troubled couple is graced by a waltz, for once a romantic one.

The multiplicity of musical ideas resulted in part from Tiomkin's smooth working relationship with Hitchcock. As Olivia Tiomkin recalls, Hitchcock "allowed him to do his own thing" after the director communicated what he wanted. There was also a personal dimension to Tiomkin's fondness for this picture: "He liked families," says Olivia, "and he liked that Pat was in it." Everything went well for this project, including the ticket sales, yet like Tiomkin's other Hitchcock scores, *Strangers on a Train* goes largely uncelebrated. Tiomkin has always been sniffed at by critics, who hold his broad hyperbole against him. According to Olivia, he never lost any sleep over this. "We don't need glory," he would say. "We're just like Liberace. We cry all the way to the bank."⁵

If the score remains obscure on its own, it nonetheless lives on as an inextricable part of one of Hitchcock's most popular movies. Indeed, so seamlessly and inevitably does it fit the picture's design that it seems like an element of Hitchcock's storyboards. According to Joseph Stefano, the screenwriter for *Psycho*, the music was like the script: Hitchcock was so certain of what he wanted that he "almost heard it before it was written."⁶