The films of Alfred Hitchcock are notable in general for their effective use of music not just as underscore but as dramatically meaningful elements contained within the films’ narratives. ¹ In the Hitchcock filmography, however, one title stands out for its association with a musical composition whose on-screen performance is central to the plot and serves as the focal point of an extended scene. For historical reasons, too, this title fairly leaps off the page: The first version of The Man Who Knew Too Much was released in 1934, and the 1956 remake represents the only instance of the director revisiting an earlier project.

Considering how different are the details of their screenplays, it seems at the very least interesting that the two films draw the propulsive power of their climactic episodes from a single piece of source music. But the 1934 and 1956 treatments of the so-called “Storm Cloud Cantata” of Arthur Benjamin are hardly identical, and a comparative analysis suggests a pair of arguments that hitherto have gone unstated in the literature on film music. First of all, in terms of compositional structure the original version of the cantata is by far superior to its 1956 revision. Secondly, the realization of the cantata’s theatrical potential is limited to the 1934 film; like the villains who appear in the opening scenes of both versions of The Man Who Knew Too Much, the “Storm Cloud Cantata” is not at all what it purports to be, but only in its original form does the music convincingly work its grand illusion.

**The Plot(s)**

In both versions of The Man Who Knew Too Much, the intrigue² concerns a husband and wife who stumble upon an assassination plot and who, prodded not so much by moral duty as by the fact that their child has been kidnapped by the would-be assassins, attempt to foil that plot. In the 1934 black-and-white version, Leslie Banks and Edna Best star as the beleaguered couple and Peter Lorre, in his debut in an English-language film, portrays the leader of the villains. In the 1956 Technicolor remake the father is played by James Stewart; the mother is played by Doris Day, who in the 1950s was famous not just as an actress but also as a singer. Appropriately, Day’s character in the remake is a retired star of musical theater, and she is given a song—“Que Sera, Sera” (Whatever Will Be, Will Be”)³—that is introduced early in the film and which later figures in the rescue of the kidnapped child.

As closely linked as it is with the newer and better-known ver-

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¹The most complete account of Hitchcock’s use of music within the narratives of his films is found in Elisabeth Weis, The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock’s Sound Track (Rutherford, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982), and source music (“diegetic” music) is the subject of a chapter in Susan Smith, Hitchcock: Suspense, Humor and Tone (London: British Film Institute, 2000). For analyses of underscores, see Royal S. Brown, “Herrmann, Hitchcock, and the Music of the Irrational,” Cinema Journal 21, no. 2 (Spring 1982); Fred Steiner, “Herrmann’s ‘Black and White’ Music for Hitchcock’s Psycho,” Film Music Notebook 1, no. 1 (fall 1974) and 1, no. 2 (winter 1974-75); and (regarding Bernard Herrmann’s score for The Trouble With Harry) David Neumeyer and James Buhler, “Analytical and Interpretive Approaches to Film Music (I): Analyzing the Music,” in Film Music: Critical Approaches, K.J. Donnelly, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001). The story bears no relationship to that of the 1922 G.K. Chesterton novella of the same title. It originated with Hitchcock but was inspired by the protagonist of Sapper’s “Bulldog Drummond” stories (Sapper was the nom de plume of Hector McNeil). François Truffaut, Hitchcock, trans. François Truffaut (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 87. ²Penned by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans in advance of their involvement with the film, “Que Sera, Sera” (“Whatever Will Be, Will Be”) in 1957 won the Academy Award for “Best Original Song in a Motion Picture.”
The 1934 Cantata: Context

Remembered today primarily for his 1938 Jamaican Rumba for two pianos and orchestra and his 1953 Harmonica Concerto, Arthur Benjamin was a much-honored composer⁹ and, in the 1930s, an important contributor of music for films. Born in Australia in 1893, he moved to London in 1911 to study composition with Charles Villiers Stanford, piano with Frederic Cliffe, and counterpoint with Thomas Dunhill at the Royal College of Music. After service in World War I¹⁰ he returned to Australia to teach piano at the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music. In 1921 he returned to England and spent the next several years furthering his career as a pianist. In 1926 he was appointed professor of piano at the RCM.

The 1934 film features a British couple who in the opening scene are on holiday in Switzerland with their teenage daughter; in the 1956 film the couple is American, vacationing in Morocco with their apparently ten- or eleven-year-old son.⁴

The 1934 film the gunman escapes the crime scene; in the 1956 film, he falls to his death from a balcony after an encounter with the kidnapped child’s father.

The 1934 film contains a musical cue for murder. The 1934 version of the film’s featured work. For one reason or another, the wife finds herself at the Albert Hall; in the lobby she encounters the gunman, whom she recognizes from the family vacation. She figures out what is happening, but only as the performance transpires. During the pregnant silence just before the cadence that contains the gunman’s cue, the wife interrupts the music with a scream, and this causes the gunman’s shot to go astray. Much excitement ensues; eventually the villains are defeated and the kidnapped child is rescued.⁸

In terms of cinematic technology, the differences between 1934 and 1956 are of course huge. Technicolor has already been mentioned, but in the decades that separate the two films there were advances as well in the recording and mixing of dialogue, sound effects, and music. Between the 1930s and 1950s there were also major changes in the styles of screenwriting and screen acting, in the lengths of feature films, and in the extent to which a composer might be asked to provide an underscore to heighten a film’s dramatic effect. Naturally, then, there are many differences between the original 1934 version of The Man Who Knew Too Much and the 1956 remake. But the basic plot for both films is as described above, with the most suspenseful scene centered on the performance of a choral-orchestral work that contains a musical cue for murder.

⁴Along with Hitchcock’s Rear Window, The Trouble With Harry, Rope, and Vertigo, the 1956 version of The Man Who Knew Much was re-released for theatrical showing in the mid-1980s and since then has had much exposure on television. The license for the 1934 version of The Man Who Knew Too Much was withdrawn when the remake went into production; it was re-licensed for television showing only in 1999.

⁵In the 1934 film, the venue is the Tabernacle of the Sun and the hymn (an original composition by Benjamin) is “Praise We Apollo’s Beams.” In the 1956 film, the venue is Ambrose Chapel and the hymn (arranged by Bernard Herrmann but dating back at least to 1791) is “The Portents.”

⁶The 1934 film features a British couple who in the opening scene are on holiday in Switzerland with their teenage daughter; in the 1956 film the couple is American, vacationing in Morocco with their apparently ten- or eleven-year-old son.

⁷In the 1934 film, the gunman escapes the crime scene; in the 1956 film, he falls to his death from a balcony after an encounter with the kidnapped child’s father.

⁸In the 1934 film the dénouement takes place at the villains’ lair; in a gunfight, most of the villains are killed by the police, but the would-be assassin is felled by a bullet fired by the mother. In the 1956 remake, the plot unravels at the embassy of the unnamed nation whose prime minister was the assassin’s target; the kidnapped child, alerted by his mother’s singing of “Que Sera, Sera,” is rescued by his father. Benjamin’s awards include the British Arts Council Prize (1951), the Festival of Britain Opera Competition Prize (1953, for The Tale of Two Cities), and the Worshipful Company of Musicians’ Cobbett Medal (1956).

⁹Benjamin enlisted in the infantry but later transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. He was shot down over Germany in July 1918 and spent the duration of the war in a prison camp.

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where his students included Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Benjamin Britten, and—not insignificantly for Benjamin’s future work as a film composer—Muir Mathieson.

Mathieson eventually became music director for the London Films studio, and early in 1934 he invited Benjamin—which whose output as a composer by this time was considerable— to write the score for a lavish production titled The Scarlet Pimpernel. Then came an offer from a competing studio, Gaumont-British, to provide music for Hitchcock’s The Man Who Knew Too Much.12 Before emigrating to Canada in 1938,13 Benjamin composed music for eight other British films.14 Upon his return to London in 1947 he rejoined the faculty of the Royal College of Music and, almost until the time of his death in April 1960, once again wrote music for films.15

For the climactic scene of his 1934 The Man Who Knew Too Much, Hitchcock asked Benjamin to concoct a piece of music that in sound and emotional tone was grand enough to pose as the opening work on a gala concert at the Albert Hall but which, in its actual temporal dimensions, was small enough to fit into a severely limited time slot. Working with poetry provided by D. B. Wyndham- Lewis, one of the co-authors of the film’s screenplay,16 Benjamin responded with a self-contained work that subsequently became known as the “Storm Cloud Cantata.”17 The text is as follows:

There came a whispered terror on the breeze. And the dark forest shook. And on the trembling trees came nameless fear, And panic overtook each flying creature of the wild.

And when they all had fled, All save the child, around whose head, screaming, The night-birds wheeled and shot away, Finding release from that which drove them onward like their prey.

Finding release, the storm clouds broke And drowned the dying moon. Finding release, the storm clouds broke. Finding release.


Even before the performance begins, for example, the 1934 film suggests that the cantata is both substantial and prestigious. The first hint occurs when the father of

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11Benjamin’s early works include the operas The Devil Take Her (1931) and Prima Donna (1933); the Pastoral Fantasy for string quartet (1924), which won a Carnegie Award; the apparently Gershwin-inspired Concertino for Piano and Orchestra (1926); the Violin Concerto (1932) and Romantic Fantasy for Violin and Viola (1935); and numerous songs, chamber music pieces, and works for solo piano. See works list in Peter J. Pirie, “Arthur Benjamin,” The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 5th ed., vol. 2, 494-495.

12For The Man Who Knew Too Much, Benjamin composed only the main title, the hymn “Praise We Apollo’s Beams,” the cantata featured in the Albert Hall scene, and the cue titled “Finale.” Other music in the film— all source music— is credited to Louis Levy (the film’s musical director), Harry M. Woods, and Charles Williams.

13Benjamin, a non-religious Jew, spent the World War II years in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he taught, composed, and worked as lecturer and conductor for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. During the 1944-45 academic year, he served on the faculty at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

14These are Whares and Strays, The Clairvoyant, and Turn of the Tide (1935); Lobsters, Wings of the Morning, and The Gay’nor (1936); and Under the Red Robe and Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel (1937).

15Benjamin’s later film scores are Masters of Bankdam, The Cumberland Story, and An Ideal Husband (1947); Steps of the Ballet (1948); The Conquest of Everest (1953); Under the Caribbean (1954); Above the Waves (1955); and Naked Earth and Fire Down Below (1957). For an account of Benjamin’s film music in general, see Andrew Youell, “Storm Clouds: A Survey of the Film Music of Arthur Benjamin,” British Music, no. 18 (1996).

16The screenplay’s other principal co-author was Charles Bennett, but Edwin Greenwood, A.R. Rawlinson, and Emlyn Williams also contributed to the script. Jane E. Sloan, Alfred Hitchcock: The Definitive Filmography (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 120.

17The music bears no title either in the credits or within the narrative of the 1934 film, and on the cue sheet it is identified simply as “Choral Symphony.” The title “Storm Cloud Cantata” appears prominently in the opening credits of the 1956 film, and that title is used in all the cue sheets and notes for “music suggestions.” Within the narrative of the 1956 film, on a poster outside the Royal Albert Hall, the music is identified as the “Cantata Storm Clouds.” The Photostat copies of Benjamin’s 1934 manuscript materials, available at Paramount, feature on their first pages the penciled-in title “The Storm Clouds.” Donald Francis Tovey, Musical Form and Matter (the Philip Maurice Denke Lecture, Oxford University, 4 June 1934) in The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 160-182. Also see Essays in Musical Analysis: Vocal Music (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 213-256.
the kidnapped child, after a fight with the villains, discovers a notice for a concert at the Albert Hall, a famously vast venue that is neither acoustically nor socially conducive to works of modest ambition. The second hint—significant for several reasons—is offered when the villains make use of a recording as they go over their plan. The existence of a commercial recording indicates that the cantata has already proven its viability not just with the listening public but also with the executives of a record company. And brief as it is, the excerpt the villains play is enough to inform the film’s audience not only that the cantata is cast in the choral-orchestral medium but also that the music is tonal in style and highly dramatic in nature; with music of this sort, one does not often find large forces applied to compositions of small dimensions. The third pre-performance hint of the fictional cantata’s size is seen just moments after the playing of the recording, as the scene shifts from the villains’ quarters to the street outside the Albert Hall; a poster describes the event as an “international celebrity concert,” and for such an occasion—no matter what the venue—it is not likely that the opening work would be a miniature.

The fact that the cantata is available on a commercial recording is crucial not just to the machination of the film’s plot but also to the suspense of the Albert Hall scene. The gunman is not simply told to fire his shot at the precise moment of the cymbal crash. In a demonstration of expert drop-the-needle technique, the leader of the villains actually plays the cadence that contains the gunman’s cue (see Example 1). And of course, as the recording is played, the cadence is heard not just by the assassin but also by the film’s audience.

The mother of the kidnapped child does not have the information—musical or otherwise—that the film’s audience derives from this important “rehearsal” scene. Indeed, all she knows when she arrives at the Albert Hall is that her husband, who came across a concert notice during his battle with the villains, has telephoned her and told her to get the hall as quickly as possible. In the hall’s lobby she encounters the gunman; no words are exchanged, but as a warning the gunman presents the mother with a locket that her daughter had with her when she was kidnapped. Also in the lobby, the mother witnesses the grand entrance of the ambassador from some unnamed foreign country. She purchases a ticket and takes a seat; as the music starts, she puts two and two together and realizes that she faces a serious dilemma.

The cantata, once it begins, is thus doubly suspenseful. On the one hand, there is the narrative drama of the mother who sorts through the information she has gathered and concludes both that an assassination is imminent and that by attempting to foil it she would endanger the life of her kidnapped child. On the other hand, there is the essentially musical drama experienced by the film’s audience members who, having heard the gunman’s cue but being unaware of its placement within the composition, wait helplessly, it would seem, for the cadence that contains the potentially deadly cymbal crash.

As the music is performed, the only spoken words come from the assassin’s accomplices, who are listening to a live radio broadcast of the performance. When a timpani roll thunderously propels the music from its opening Lento section into its more turbulent second half, one of the villains, apparently mistaking the percussive gesture for the gunman’s cue, asks: “Was that it?” At the end of the piece, as the music descends from its cymbal-studded peak, the same villain nonchalantly says: “Sounds as if it went all right.”

The Albert Hall scene, of course, is much more than “all right.” Emotionally volatile and filled with promises of resolution that do not materialize until the very end, the short but seemingly long “Storm Cloud Cantata” is suspenseful in itself. Its dramatic ebbs and flows are matched, though seldom exactly paralleled, by the brilliant silent acting of Edna Best in the role of the mother.

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1In the 1934 film the disc is not shown to the audience. In the 1956 film, however, the audience actually sees the disc, albeit fleetingly and from a distance; the label on the disc, which is quite possibly an LP, lists just a single work.
2The poster in the 1956 film provides more information. It actually names the work, along with the conductor (Bernard Herrmann) and the soloist (Barbara Howitt). But the poster lists no other work, which suggests that the cantata might well be the program’s main attraction.
3In the 1934 film the excerpt is played just once. In the 1956 film it is played three times: twice for the benefit of the gunman and then once again for the private enjoyment of the ringleader.
4In the 1956 film the mother goes to the hall, without her husband’s knowledge, because she thinks that that is where she can find the Scotland Yard investigator who has been assigned to the family’s case.
5In the 1956 film, the prime minister—not the ambassador—of the unnamed foreign country is the gunman’s target; the ambassador in the 1956 film is one of the villains.
6At least one film critic has suggested that the audience’s role in the scene is not entirely innocent, that Hitchcock—by revealing the cue—has made the audience an “accomplice” to the murder plot. Patrick Humphries, The Films of Alfred Hitchcock (Greenwich, CT: Portland House, 1986), 38.
and they are fitted with a counterpoint of visually imagery that focuses, with increasing sharpness of detail, on the gunman, the intended victim, and the orchestra’s cymbalist. As these various elements combine and play off one another, the build-up of tension is great, indeed, and a scream seems an entirely appropriate form of release.

The 1934 Cantata: Analysis

In its original version, Arthur Benjamin’s “Storm Cloud Cantata” consists of a mere one hundred and twenty-six measures. It begins, after a timpani roll, with a solidly tonal fanfare in A minor and ends, a few bars after the cadence that serves as the gunman’s cue, in A major. Between those terminal points the music courses through a succession of tonal centers (i-III-VI-V-I) that is simple as well as musically logical and which, when reduced to an outline, reveals an architecture that is fairly symmetrical in terms of phrase structure and numbers of measures per section (see Figure 1). Simultaneous with the background’s smooth flow of tonal centers, however, is a seemingly disjunct series of foreground musical episodes. In fact, these episodes are deftly connected by short modulatory passages and have numerous thematic elements in common. But the episodes are markedly different in texture and expression, and thus the transitions from one to another have the effect not of smooth development but, rather, of dramatic leaps into new musical territories.

Entirely in the tonic, the first episode (3/4, Lento) is not only introduced by the fanfare but also framed and subdivided by it. The mezzo-soprano soloist’s opening statement (lines 1-2 of the poem) rises out of the introduction’s concluding A minor harmony; six measures later, after an emotionally intense declamation whose accompaniment features a quick series of parallel triads as well as German sixth chords that resolve directly to the tonic, the end of the solo line elides with the fanfare’s first reiteration. In turn, the end of the fanfare elides with a choral passage (lines 3-4) that features in its first half a simple i-iv-V progression and in its second half a more turbulent succession of harmonies. The choral passage settles, albeit discomfortingly, with a tritone descent from F major to B major (see Example 2); this alien harmony (too “conclusive” to be perceived as a secondary dominant) is separated only by a brief silence from the tonic, which returns as the fanfare is sounded—first in A minor and then in the relative major—for the final time.

The second episode, in a richly chromatic version of C major, is marked by a slower harmonic rhythm and triplet figures in the accompaniment. In the first four
Figure 1. Harmonic outline of Arthur Benjamin’s “Storm Cloud Cantata” (1934 version).
measures the vocal material—for antiphonal sopranos and tenors (line 5)—is lyrical and expansive. When the scoring focuses on the mezzo-soprano soloist and male chorus (lines 6-7), however, the cantata takes on darker qualities; the soaring theme assigned to the phrase “All save the child” spirals into an onomatopoeic figure on the word “screaming,” and the supporting harmonies intensify into a disorienting alternation of tritone-related seventh chords (see Example 3).

A rallentando, an abandonment of the triplet figures, and a rising eighth-note passage for solo oboe signal the transition to the third episode, whose relaxed sequential patterns and homophonic statements for the most part hold to the key of F major, i.e., the subdominant of the previous episode’s C major. Scored principally (and sometimes a cappella) for women’s chorus, the third episode recapitulates both text (lines 6-7) and the “All save the child” motif; its harmonic rhythm is even slower than that of the previous episode, and it ends with a prolonged pianissimo iii-V-I cadence in F major (see Example 4). This cadence, which occurs shortly after the midpoint of the cantata’s brief duration, is significant textually as well as structurally. Whereas earlier the words “…wheeled and shot away” had functioned as part of a modifying clause, here they are presented with an air of finality, punctuated not by a comma but by a period. Furthermore, they coincide precisely with the filmic image of the balcony seat from which the assassin has apparently “wheeled and shot away” in order to position himself for the kill.

Like the Lento section, the cantata’s second half—4/4, and initially marked Allegro agitato—can be divided into episodes that are similar in length yet strikingly different in character. Until the arrival of the notated key of A major sixteen measures before the cantata’s end, however, the tonal identity of the section is ambiguous; although pedal notes clearly enough establish background tonal centers of F, E-flat, and E, an abundance of chromaticism and tritone-related harmonies effectively blurs any sense of key in the music’s foreground.

The nonvocal first episode of the Allegro agitato section elides with the above-mentioned iii-V-I cadence on F, and its opening gesture is the timpani roll that one of the villains comically mistakes for the gunman’s cue. But whereas the timpani roll and ensuing quarter-note pulses indeed articulate the pitch F, the chords outlined by the brass instruments during the episode’s fugato-like first four measures are those of D-flat major and G major (see Example 5). For the next four measures the music holds to the mixolydian mode based on G, yet the pedal F persists even through an emphatic cadence. After the cadence, the music abruptly descends by a major second for a restatement—note-for-note except for the lowering of pitch—of the entire eight-bar passage.

Just as abruptly, the pedal rises by a half-step to mark the start of the Allegro agitato’s second episode, which brings the choral forces once more to the fore and ends with a climactic gesture that, unlike the timpani roll, genuinely has the potential to deceive listeners into thinking that the gun-
man’s cue has arrived. The episode begins with the male voices presenting the fugato theme in diminution and completing—after an interruption of almost twenty-five seconds—the grammatical construction of the text’s second quatrain (line 8). At the outset the harmony is A minor but, mirroring the sequential pattern heard in the previous episode, it shifts to G minor after the sopranos and altos restate the qualifying phrase (“All save the child”) with which the quatrain began (see Example 6). Following the sequential repetition of material over the persistent pedal E, the harmonic rhythm accelerates rapidly as the full chorus shifts the focus of the text from “night-birds” to “storm clouds” (lines 9-10). Hitchcock’s camera at this point concentrates on the increasingly anxious


25Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but the start of this dramatically weighty episode occurs precisely at the temporal point that divides the cantata’s duration into the so-called “Divine Proportion.” The “Divine Proportion,” or “Golden Section,” is a mathematical ratio in which the larger part is related to the whole as the smaller part is related to the larger part. This ratio is often found in nature and has figured in works of visual art since the days of ancient Greece. The compositional procedures of Béla Bartók notwithstanding, it remains debatable whether the ratio can be meaningfully applied to a broad range of music or, indeed, whether it has any musical significance whatsoever. See Edward Rothstein, Emblems of Mind: The Inner Life of Music and Mathematics (New York: Avon Books, 1995), 156-171.
Example 6. Arthur Benjamin, “Storm Cloud Cantata” (1934 version), mm. 75-81

mother and her glances at the boxes of both the assassin and his target; in tandem with the suspense-laden visual imagery, the primary melodic material rises chromatically and reaches an explosive peak with the chorus’ fourth iteration of “the storm clouds broke.” In this concluding passage of the episode, whereas a single harmony occupies each of the first six measures, the diminuendo cascade of parallel triads in the two-bar cadence—echoing the tritone descent heard at the end of the cantata’s first episode—features just one harmony per beat (see Example 7).

Like the second episode, the third episode of the Allegro agitato section is based for its entire length on the pedal note E, and it is during this third episode that the E once again resumes its function as the dominant of the cantata’s overall tonal structure. Not until the end of this episode, however, is a convincing sense of tonality re-established. The tension-dissipating series of parallel triads that leads into the episode descends from C major to F-sharp major. Propelled by a martial rhythm, triadic harmonies rise chromatically from F-sharp major to B major as the full chorus monophonically reiterates the “dying moon” phrase. During the episode’s second half, as the chorus again sings “the storm clouds broke,” the basic harmony (still set over the pedal E) holds to an aggregate made up of the pitches D, F-sharp, A, and B; heard first as a B minor seventh chord and then as a D sixth chord, the harmony supports a forceful crescendo whose sustained fortissimo climax coincides with the third statement of the word “broke” (see Example 8).

For the film’s audience, this moment is potentially even more misleading than the climax of the previous episode, because the crescendo coincides with a sixteen-second shot of the gunman’s pistol, in extreme close-up, emerging from behind a curtain and then slowly withdrawing.26

In the context of the tonal ambiguities of the preceding fifty-two measures, the grandiose IV-iii-V7-I cadence (marked Ritenuto molto) that leads into the finale seems remarkably straightforward. Following suit, the cantata’s last episode (clearly notated in A major, and marked Molto meno mosso quasi maestoso) begins with a passage that features a dramatically slowed harmonic rhythm and a patently simple I-vi-IV chord progression. Instead of reaching the expected dominant harmony, however, the chorus’s triple declaration (line 11) lands on a major triad built on the lowered third (see Example 9). Immediately after this deceptive half-cadence comes the much-anticipated gunman’s “cue” (line 12), which, as a V7-iv pattern, is likewise deceptive. The mother’s scream having by this time caused the gunman to miss his target, the cantata concludes succinctly with several loud measures on the tonic harmony.

As noted above, the overall structure of the cantata is simple, symmetrical, and logical. It is thus a solid structure in and of itself, and the impression of its solidity is enhanced by motivic links between sections, sequential treatment of thematic materials, and many instances in which a distinctly new episode—what Schoenberg called a “change of scenery”27—is signaled in advance by an obvious alteration of texture. The last-mentioned point is especially significant, for the cantata traverses far more musical “scenes” than one would expect to find in a work lasting just a bit more than four minutes. As well as being solidly built, it seems the cantata fairly teems with musical information.

It is this masterly combination of form and content—a simple mold filled almost to overflowing with richly variegated, often emotionally volatile musical ideas—that produces the illusion. Granted, the amount of drama contained within the film’s narrative as the cantata is being performed helps give audience members the impression that the music is longer than it actually is. But it is likely that listeners would misjudge the length of the cantata even if they heard it without its visual accoutrements. Although the dimensions of the whole and all its parts are indeed small, the cantata—in its basic design, internal relationships, and expressive range—nonetheless bears a striking resemblance to the typical English oratorio of the post-Victorian period. Its brevity notwithstanding, the 1934 version of the “Storm Cloud Cantata” is constructed very much along the lines of a large-scale work, and thus it tends to be perceived as something much more substantial than it really is.


The 1956 Cantata: Myth and Fact

Bernard Herrmann was the composer engaged for the 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and Hollywood lore is littered with misinformation about how under Herrmann’s supervision the cantata was adapted for the remake.

The idea that the cantata was altered hardly at all perhaps stems in part from Herrmann’s comment, in a 1971 interview, to the effect that while he “could have written a new piece instead of keeping Arthur Benjamin’s music,” he “didn’t think anybody could better what [Benjamin had] done in the original” (emphasis mine).28 It is more likely, however, that the main source of confusion is a much-circulated statement by Hitchcock. In his lengthy interview with François Truffaut regarding the 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the director concluded that aside from narrative details involving the pantomimed acting of James Stewart and Doris Day, “the scene in the Albert Hall is quite similar in both versions, don’t you agree? The cantata is the same.”29

But the cantata is not the same. Whereas the “Storm Cloud Cantata” in the 1934 film lasts four minutes and twelve seconds, in the 1956 film it lasts nine minutes and seven seconds. Among other rather obvious differences, in the 1934 version the mezzo-soprano begins her solo almost immediately; in the 1956 version she does not even rise to her feet until the cantata has been underway for almost three minutes.

In addition to the persistent myth that the music in the two Albert Hall scenes is identical, one can find many other erroneous statements about the 1956 version of the cantata. On the official web site of the International Bernard Herrmann Society, for example, we read that, “given the option to write his own piece, Herrmann declined,” and that “Herrmann hired Benjamin to lengthen the original piece.”30 On a web site devoted to British composers, we are told both that it was Herrmann’s decision to pay homage to Benjamin by reprising the cantata and that “the [1956] film features far more of the cantata than the 1934 original.”31 In a similar vein, Harris and Lasky’s popular 1976 *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* informs readers that, contrary to the 1934 film, in the remake the Albert Hall scene “continues for almost the duration of the entire movement.”32 Another book from the same year, Donald Spoto’s *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, notes that the opening credits for the 1956 film feature “a formally dressed orchestra in the Royal Albert Hall, London, playing a selection from the first part of the ‘Storm Cloud Cantata’ . . . .”33 Also apropos of the opening credits, Elisabeth Weis, writing about the 1934 film, states that “a considerable portion of the piece (‘The Storm Cloud Cantata’ by Arthur Benjamin) is played under the opening titles, but it stops short, just before the last notes that comprise the crucial phrase.”34

More recently, Herrmann biographer Steven C. Smith writes that Herrmann was “given the option in 1955 to write a new work for the sequence” but “chose not to,” that Herrmann’s reorchestration involved “doubling several parts and adding expressive new voices for harp, organ, and brass,” and that “Benjamin was . . . commissioned to write an additional minute and twenty seconds of music for the [1956] film . . . .”35 In an essay devoted largely to a dramatic interpretation of the Albert Hall scene in the remake, sociologist Murray Pomerance states that, in addition to a repeat in the *Allegro agitato* section, “about one and a half minutes of material was added to the introduction.”36 Royal S. Brown, in his 1994 survey of the history and aesthetics of film music, observes that a comparative listening to the two versions of the cantata “reveals considerable padding added by Herrmann to Arthur Benjamin’s original score” and that, along with slowing the tempos, Herrmann “delays the moment of the climactic cymbal crash by solidly extending the

29Quoted in Truffaut, 94.
34Weis, 83.
the Herrmann score).

Perhaps most significant, the decision to recycle the “Storm Cloud Cantata” for the 1956 film was entirely Hitchcock’s,44 and it seems unlikely that Herrmann was ever asked to compose a piece of his own for the 1956 Albert Hall scene. In December 1954 and January 1955 Herrmann worked on the score for Hitchcock’s The Trouble With Harry, and immediately thereafter began work on the score for Burt Lancaster’s The Kentuckian.42 But by 25 January 1955, in a letter to Sidney L. Bernstein, Hitchcock’s longtime friend and partner in Transatlantic Pictures, the director had already indicated his interest in using the Benjamin cantata for the remake of The Man Who Knew Too Much:

Mr. Alfred Hitchcock is preparing the script entitled ‘THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH,’ which was made in England for the first time in 1929. [sic]

Mr. Hitchcock has informed us that you composed the symphonic piece used for the Concert Hall episode. I believed it was composed in such a manner as to reach a climax involving a cymbal crash at the very instant that a murder was being committed.

There is a possibility of again using your composition for the new picture. Therefore, I would like very much an expression from you as to the

I tried to contact you by phone from New York, but as usual the circuits were busy. The purpose of the call was to ask you in completing the deal with Earl St. John for ‘The Man Who’ to try and have included the rights to the musical piece that was used in the Albert Hall sequence. This piece was written by a composer named Arthur Benjamin, and I think the actual words were written by D.B. Windham-Lewis. [sic] Whether Gaumont British have any record of this I haven’t the faintest idea, but in case we want to use this in the present version, I am sure that Paramount will require some clearance.

Of course, it is quite possible that all the actual material has been destroyed, in which case I don’t know what we can do about it.45

Bernstein replied (on 10 February 1955) that it was “impossible for us to get the rights to the original sound track of ‘Man Who Knew Too Much’ or the music used on the track. This contains ‘licensed’ music which, in England, is licensed for one film only, and it is impossible to transfer the ‘copyright’ to anybody.”44 But Hitchcock was optimistic, and even before he received the reply from Bernstein he had Roy Fjastad, the music director of Paramount Studios, write directly to Benjamin:

Mr. Hitchcock has informed us that you composed the symphonic piece used for the Concert Hall episode. I believed it was composed in such a manner as to reach a climax involving a cymbal crash at the very instant that a murder was being committed.

There is a possibility of again using your composition for the new picture. Therefore, I would like very much an expression from you as to the

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37Royal S. Brown, Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 79.
39Three Photostat copies of Benjamin’s original score are on file at Paramount’s music library.
40A conductor’s score for the 1956 version of the cantata is on file at Paramount. The full score of the 1956 cantata as orchestrated by Bernard Herrmann is controlled by Theme and Variations of Danbury, Connecticut. For access to that full score, I am indebted to John Waxman.
41Truffaut, 94.
42Smith, 194.
43Letter from Bernstein to Hitchcock, dated 10 February 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
availability of this music. I would also like a quotation covering the right to use the music, and the information as to whether conductor’s parts, scores, orchestra parts, are available.45

At first Benjamin believed his score to be no longer available, but in a letter dated 25 February 1955 he informed Fjastad that he had “located, at long last, the Full Score for the film ‘The Man Who Knew Much.’ The Orchestral Material, Chorus Parts have been destroyed, but you may be interested to have the orchestration for the ‘Oratorio Section.’”46 By the second week of March the matter of rights to the music still had not been settled; nevertheless, Fjastad extended to Benjamin an offer:

I am pleased to advise you that Mr. Hitchcock has decided to use your composition of the Symphonic choral piece used in the original production of “The Man Who Knew Too Much.”

You stated, in your letter of February 25, that you had located the full score, but that the orchestral and chorus parts had been destroyed. Could you tell me whether the choral parts are indicated in the orchestral score, so that the entire number could be reconstructed by extracting the individual parts from the master orchestral score? Mr. Hitchcock wishes to elongate the playing time of this composition about 1½ minutes, and naturally we would be pleased if you would accept the assignment to compose this additional material...47

A night wire from London to Hollywood, dated 24 March, informed the production team that Benjamin was “willing to write additional music.”48 A wire dated four days later confirmed that Benjamin “will do [an] additional minute and half ” of music in time for recording, in England, on 20 May; the same wire noted that Benjamin had recommended his friend Muir Mathieson to be the conductor for both the recording and the on-screen performance of the cantata.49 A third wire, dated 30 March, this time from Fjastad in Hollywood to the London operatives, urgently requested a Photostat copy of the “complete orchestral and vocal score of Arthur Benjamin, London, symphonic number for the Hitchcock production ‘THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH.’” This material required for photographic planning.50 And a telegram from London, dated 2 April, stated—albeit somewhat cryptically—that “photostat copy complete orchestral and vocal score now being made, will airmail Monday.”51

At this point, it should be noted, the agreement between Benjamin and Hitchcock called for Benjamin to produce “additional music” so that the scene’s playing time could be extended by approximately ninety seconds. It is difficult to say precisely when Bernard Herrmann entered the picture. According to a memo from Fjastad to Paramount attorney Sidney Justin, Herrmann “started his services in connection with the pre-production activities on May 22, 1955.”52 But surely Herrmann’s involvement began more than a month before that, for a memo from producer Herbert Coleman to Herrmann, dated 18 April, has stapled to it a typed version of the cantata’s text and a request that Herrmann review the text “for accuracy before we sent it on for censorship approval.”53 (The typescript of the cantata text has the words “All save the child—all save the child” crossed out with ballpoint pen; above it are handwritten the words “Yet stood the trees—yet stood the trees,” and in the next line the letter “s” is appended to the word “head.” The memo itself bears the note, written in ballpoint pen, “Bernie said OK.”54) Another communication from Coleman to Herrmann, a letter dated 26 April, confirms that the London Symphony Orchestra and the Covent Garden Chorus had been booked, for the purposes of recording the cantata, for 26-28 May.55

By mid-April, screenwriter John Michael Hayes had not yet completed even a first draft of the film’s script, yet shooting on location, in Marrakesh, was set to begin on 12 May. On 29 April Hitchcock departed for London in

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4Letter from Roy Fjastad to Arthur Benjamin, dated 11 February 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
5Letter from Benjamin to Fjastad, dated 25 February 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
6Letter from Fjastad to Benjamin, dated 11 March 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
7Night wire, dated 24 March 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
8Night wire, dated 28 March 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
9Night wire, dated 30 March 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
10Telegram, dated 2 April 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
11Memo from Fjastad to Justin, dated 12 July 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
12Memo from Herbert Coleman to Bernard Herrmann, dated 18 April 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
13Ibid.
14Letter from Coleman to Herrmann, dated 26 April 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
order to finish casting the film’s minor roles, but just before he left he outlined the Albert Hall sequence so that a summary could be submitted to the Production Code Administration for approval.57 A version of Hayes’s script dated 7 May is optimistically titled “final draft screenplay,” yet it ends with the scene in which the father makes his escape from the villains’ den, i.e., just before the Albert Hall scene.58 Shooting in Marrakesh began on 13 May and ended ten days later; the London studio, dated 24 May and written in ink but crossed out.59 The recording sessions for the cantata—under Herrmann’s baton—also began on 26 May; three days had been scheduled, but only two were required.60

Up to this point, all the extant and available correspondence between Benjamin and the production team indicates that Benjamin had agreed to provide Paramount with the original cantata and approximately ninety seconds—inserted somewhere into the score—of “additional music.” Presumably this means that Benjamin had agreed to compose new material and to adjust the score himself. But a letter from Benjamin to the studio, dated 24 May and written in the manner of a contract, implies a different scenario. In addition to granting rights for “such part of the said music written by me as aforesaid comprising the composition called ‘TITLES’ and two items of the ‘Choral Symphony,’” Benjamin writes:

I understand that it is your desire to alter the music and also to alter the words of the lyrics in such manner as you may think fit to suit your said production, to which I have no objection . . . .61

Christopher Husted, Bernard Herrmann Music, has stated that Benjamin somehow suggested to Herrmann how the music might be altered to suit the new film,62 but documentation of such suggestions has yet to surface. Benjamin’s letter to Paramount, on the other hand, gives the impression that as of 24 May—two days before the recording sessions were to begin—Benjamin still had no idea how the music or text were going to be altered.

Photostat copies of Benjamin’s material were airmailed to Paramount in early April, and the material consists of not only full scores for the two sections of the cantata but also the full score of the “Title Music” for the 1934 film. Three copies of this material are on file at the Paramount music library. One of these bears the marking “original score” (in pencil, circled) on the first page of the “Title Music” and, on the fourth page, in blue ink, Benjamin’s autograph and the dates for what are likely the 1934 dubbing sessions;63 the other two scores are copies of this “original” Photostat. In the case of all three scores, the pages are ordered with the “Title Music” followed by the “Choral Symphony,” and the pages have been appropriately renumbered. Repeats (in thick red pencil) have been added to the first section of the “Choral Symphony” and certain measures contained within those repeats have been marked “Cut. Not in first time.” The lyrics have been adjusted (in red or blue pencil) to agree with the emendations affixed to the 18 April memo from Coleman to Herrmann, and—most tellingly—the words “Title Music” on the first page have been crossed out and replaced by the words “The Storm Clouds.”

The 1956 Cantata: Analysis

Details of orchestration and tempo aside, this is how the 1956 version of the “Storm Cloud Cantata” differs from its 1934 predecessor:

- Whereas the 1934 version begins with a full measure of a crescendo timpani roll, the first sounds of the 1956 version are those of trumpets and trombones articulating the fanfare.
- Whereas in the 1934 version the fanfare is followed by a brief diminuendo transition into the mezzo-soprano solo

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57DeRosa, 185.
58Final draft screenplay by John Michael Hayes, dated 7 May 1955, typescript, Margaret Herrick Library.
59DeRosa, 188-192.
61Letter from Benjamin to Paramount, dated 24 May 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
62Christopher Husted, telephone conversation with author, 17 November 2000.
(two measures of a sustained A minor chord swept over by harp arpeggios), in the 1956 version the fanfare leads directly into the fortissimo statement of the thematic material from the “Title Music” of the 1934 film. This is volatile music, propelled in its first several measures by syncopations in both the highest and lowest orchestral registers. It is also thematically complex; it presents the fanfare motif four times in its original form and three times in variants, but the predominant melody is a soaring line not obviously related to anything else in the cantata. And the harmonic motion is quick; within its short span the passage not only traverses a wide array of chromatic harmonies but actually modulates from A minor to D major to A major before abruptly—after the final iteration of the fanfare—shifting back to A minor.

• After this twenty-measure passage of music from the 1934 “Titles,” the revised cantata picks up where it left off, i.e., at the harp arpeggios that in the 1934 version mark the transition into the vocal material. The eight-measure passage that follows (equivalent to measures 6-13 of the original score) however, does not include the mezzo-soprano’s vocal line. Although the passage cadences, as does the original music, with a German sixth chord leading into A minor, the landing point of the cadence is equivalent to measure 22 of the 1934 cantata; in other words, measures 14-21 of the original score are skipped over.

• The ensuing passage (equivalent to measures 22-47 of the original score) once again omits the vocal material. In the 1934 version, the cadence at this point—approached via G minor, with a strong descent from B-flat to A in the bass line—is to F major, the tonal center on which the entire first half of the cantata will momentarily come to rest. In the 1956 version, the cadence takes on phrygian qualities as it returns the music to its initial tonality of A minor. The cadential measure is the equivalent of the 1934 score’s measure 8 (i.e., the measure in which the mezzo-soprano makes her entrance), and from this point the cantata proceeds, with one notable exception, more or less as it was originally conceived.

• In the 1934 version, at the cusp between the cantata’s two halves, the chorus’ softly sustained cadential chord occupies the same measure as the crescendo roll on the timpani that launches the Allegro agitato. In the 1956 version the two halves are not elided, and the cadential F major sonority lasts a full measure before the timpani roll begins.

• The ensuing passage whose tension dissipates in the cascade of parallel triads, the cantata in the 1956 film abruptly returns to the start of the Allegro agitato. The descending series of chords does not land on the F-sharp major sonority that, in the 1934 score, begins the cantata’s next episode (shown above in Example 7); instead, the revised version of the cantata at this point does not even include the final word of the poetic line (“and drowned the dying moon”) that, in the original score, spans the cadence. Rather, as the chorus sings the absurdly clipped-off phrase “and drowned the dying,” the music in the 1956 film leaps directly from the cadence figure’s penultimate G major triad to the purely instrumental D-flat major figure that began the Allegro agitato.

• After this repeat of thirty-four measures, the 1956 cantata proceeds as in the original version. A single measure is added to the cadence that follows the female protagonist’s scream, and the final chord, instead of being limited to just an emphatic quarter note on the first beat, is held—with a fermata—for the entire measure. (For a comparison of the order and durations of the sections of the two versions of the cantata, see Figure 2).

There is one other alteration, involving the text of the cantata. In the cantata’s original version, the second quatrain of the poem reads:
And when they all had fled,
All save the child, around
whose head, screaming,
The night-birds wheeled and
shot away,
Finding release from that
which drove them onward
like their prey.

As was noted in the analysis of
the 1934 version of the cantata, the
phrase that begins the second line
of the quatrain (“All save the
child”) is articulated several times
by the female voices. After its
introduction by the mezzo-
soprano soloist midway through
the second episode, the phrase
forms the entire textual substance
of the imitative passage with
which the sopranos and altos be-
gin the third episode; later in the
third episode it is treated lyrically
and a cappella at the start of the F
major passage that ends the
cantata’s first half, and then it is
brought back in the form of an
antiphonal response to the first
choral statements of the Allegro
agitato.

In the 1956 version of the
cantata, “All save the child” is
consistently replaced with the
phrase “Yet stood the trees.”
Pomerance argues that this is an
improvement; considering that the
female protagonist in the scene is
concerned for the life of her child,
he says, repeated references to
“the child” would have been “irri-
tatingly pat, maudlin, and then
thin.” That idea is debatable, but
it seems incontrovertible that the
amended text violates both syntax
and grammar; in the 1956 version,
it is “trees” rather than “creatures
of the wild” that opt not to flee the
approaching storm, and somehow
these plural trees have a single
“head” around which the screaming
night-birds wheel.

The 1956 Cantata: Comment

Elisabeth Weis, in a chapter
that argues that the second version
of The Man Who Knew Too Much is
“a decided improvement on the
first in its stylistic use of music,”
observes that “music is such a
useful tool for Hitchcock because a
piece of music has its own struc-
ture, a preestablished order
against which he can time the
struggles of his characters.” The
premise is granted, but it is pre-
cisely because the musical
structure of the 1956 version of the
cantata is so ungainly that it suf-
fers in comparison to its
predecessor.

The most damaging flaw in the
1956 version of the cantata is the
repeat at the start of the Allegro
agitato. Along with forcing an im-
portant word to simply vanish
from the text, this literal repetition
of thirty-four measures severely
diminishes the music’s potential
for suspense. As was shown in the
analysis of the original cantata, the
intensity of the first two episodes

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* Numerals within boxes represent durations in seconds; size of boxes represents duration relative to the entirety of the piece. Numerals in
parentheses indicate instrumental variants of similarly numbered sections of the 1934 version of the cantata. A numeral followed by an apostrophe
indicates an exact repeat of the similarly numbered section of the 1956 cantata. The label “titles” for the first section of the 1956 version indicates the
title music from the 1934 film.
of the Allegro agitato builds in such a way that listeners might well expect a violent action to occur at the fourth iteration of the phrase “the storm clouds broke”; when the climax is reached and its anticipatory music is then repeated, listeners can hardly be misled. Just as significant, although tritone-related chords figure prominently elsewhere in the cantata, here the move from G major to D-flat major makes little musical sense; since the series of parallel triads descends diatonically from a chord built on F-sharp, context dictates that the “scale” be completed with another harmony built on F-sharp.

It is difficult, of course, to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that any segment of music is somehow “not right.” In this case, however, convincing testimony is offered by the available scores. While the questionable repeat is indeed heard in the 1956 film, it is not indicated in any of the marked-up Photostats of Benjamin’s original materials, in the conductor’s score, or in the full orchestral score.

Clearly, the repeat is an audio edit, decided upon after the music had been recorded and probably not until the end of September 1955. Hitchcock’s notes for a “music cutting track” dated 6-12 August contain descriptions of a sequence of shots that is similar to, but shorter than, what appears in the film.68 Actor James Stewart recalled that the Albert Hall scene was originally shot with dialogue between him and Doris Day, and that the pantomime was an afterthought of Hitchcock’s.69 Not until 30 August did Hitchcock dictate a “first draft” of his own scenario for the Albert Hall scene,68 and as late as 26 September the sequence was still being revised.69

Another problematic detail is the cadence that completes the introduction to the 1956 version of the cantata. In the original score, the comparable cadence occurs midway through the third episode; since the entire episode is in F major, the movement from G minor to F major (with the pitches B-flat and A in the bass line) is a quasi-plagal relaxation that eases the music into the soft passage that ends the cantata’s first half. In the revised score, the movement from G minor to A minor amounts to a modulation; it is a recapitulative gesture, a return to a tonal area that has already been explored, and thus it thwarts the music’s forward flow.

A third detail that troubles the cantata in the 1956 film is its opening twenty-measure passage of material drawn from the 1934 film’s title sequence. If heard out of context, this passage might serve as an excellent demonstration both of Herrmann’s skills as an orchestrator and of Benjamin’s skills as a composer in the symphonic tradition. But the music is inconsistent with the rest of the cantata; with its syncopations, its fragmentary treatment of motivic material, and its strongly modulatory nature, it has the effect more of a development section than an exposition. The passage is definitely ear-catching, as befits music designed for the title sequence of a film. But it seems inappropriate for the introduction to a composition that rhythmically and harmonically is of a much simpler nature.

In comparing the 1956 version of the “Storm Cloud Cantata” to the 1934 version, one must of course consider not just details but also the entirety of the music. The illusion of the 1934 cantata is conjured by a masterly combination of content and form: A large amount of richly varied material is compressed into a solid and logical structure that, although it follows large-scale models, is in fact very small. With the twenty-measure addendum at the beginning, the 1956 cantata is even more abundant in musical ideas and planes of expressivity. But with meandering tonal centers in the introduction and a momentum-deflecting repeat in the second half, the design of the 1956 cantata is ungainly. And the mere fact that it lasts more than twice as long as its predecessor makes the pretense—that it is a short work posing as a long work—all the harder to believe.

Finally, along with the purely musical considerations, there is the not inconsequential matter of the placement of the 1934 and 1956 cantatas within their respective films. In the 1934 version of The Man Who Knew Too Much the gunman’s cue is played just once, and it is followed quickly by the cantata itself. After the cue, the setting changes almost immediately to the exterior of Albert Hall; although two minutes and forty seconds separate the recorded excerpt from the start of the performance, all that is heard during this interval are a few lines of monologue from the leader of the villains, several automobile

68Albert Hall music cutting track, dated 6-12 August 1955, Margaret Herrick Library.
69Memo dated 30 August 1955, Margaret Herrick Library. Although twenty-five mimeographed copies of the draft were apparently made, none is contained in the Herrick Library.
horns outside the hall, and some pre-concert audience noise mixed with the sound of the orchestra tuning up.

In the 1956 film, the cue is played three times, but its third playing and the start of the cantata are not nearly so contiguous. The time-span between the one event and the other is seventeen minutes, and these minutes are filled not just with plot-propelling dialogue and action but also with music. Some of this music—the singing of the hymn in Ambrose Chapel, the clanging of the chapel bell when the father makes his escape from the chapel—is contained within the narrative. Most of it—about seven minutes' worth—is Herrmann's underscoring, featuring “two complementary chromatic segments” and “pulsating string chords which rise in chromatic steps,” for the transition from the villains’ chamber to the exterior of the chapel, the fight between the father and the kidnappers, and the villains’ movement from the chapel to the embassy. It takes fourteen minutes to get from the final playing of the cue to the mother’s arrival at Albert Hall; the lobby scene lasts another three minutes, during which the mother engages in dialogue with the gunman, other concert-goers, and several ushers. Since in the 1956 film the cue is played not just once but three times, the audience perhaps has a better chance to memorize it; since the cue is so distanced from the cantata—by actual time and by dramatic and musical distractions—the audience also has a better chance to forget it.

over the other is still being debated. On the one hand, there are those who feel that the remake counts as “one of America’s great films” and is “arguably . . . [Hitchcock’s] most accomplished work.” On the other hand, there are those who feel that, in comparison with the earlier film, the 1956 version is “flaccid and over-long,” a production “weighed down with gloss and the sort of psychological elaboration it cannot really bear.” It can be left to Hitchcock critics to sort out the matter, but it is worth noting that the director himself said that whereas the 1934 film was the product of “a talented amateur,” the 1956 film was the “work of a professional.”

Certainly the 1956 film contains much to praise, not the least of which are the deft manipulation of images and Doris Day’s superb performance in the Albert Hall scene. Not even virtuosic editing and acting, however, can bring the dramatic power of that scene up to the level of its 1934 counterpart. Because of the way he elaborated the plot and developed the characters for the remake, Hitchcock had understandable reasons for asking his musical colleagues to expand the 1934 cantata by much more than the minute and a half he had originally requested from Arthur Benjamin. But in requiring alterations of music that he at first thought would remain essentially “the same,” Hitchcock prevented himself from repeating his own cinematic masterstroke.

The Albert Hall scene depicts the performance of a cantata, but it also contains the cantata, and thus it is the cantata itself—as a musical entity—that governs the scene’s dramatic flow. The 1956 version of the cantata—with its distended shape, its circuitous harmonic flow, and its interrupted emotional momentum—is musically weak in and of itself, and its effect is further weakened by its isolation from the cue that the audience is asked to nervously anticipate. In contrast, the 1934 version of the cantata, which begins with the gunman’s cue still ringing in the audience’s ears, is taut, linear, and relentless in its build-up of tension. The piece lasts barely more than four minutes, yet its form and content cause it to be perceived as something much larger; the scream that interrupts its penultimate cadence comes after the music has logically traveled through a great deal of emotional territory over what seems to be a long stretch of time.

Like a skilled actor, the composition in the 1934 film successfully poses as something other than what it really is. In its original form—but only in its original form—Arthur Benjamin’s “Storm Cloud Cantata” stands as one of the grandest musical illusions in cinematic history.

Conclusion

The superiority of one version of The Man Who Knew Too Much

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71Humphries, 135.
72Spoto (1992), 249.
73Pomerance, 208.
75Truffaut, 94.
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