

# Symphonic Storyteller

Four decades ago, Hollywood seemed on the verge of eliminating symphonic film scores in favor of pop tunes and synthesizers. In fact, just the opposite happened, and the key may be John Williams.

by Jack Sullivan

“**T**he Mozart of our day.” That’s what conductor Gustavo Dudamel calls Hollywood composer John Williams. Dudamel has idolized Williams since his childhood infatuation with *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and *Indiana Jones*. “He has a special creativity,” Dudamel recently told me backstage after a concert, “and he works with incredible speed. He created an Adagio based on the score for the new *Star Wars* film in one night, and we played it the next day. I love working with him.”

The extent to which John Williams’s music has entered our bloodstream is



Craig Mathew / Los Angeles Philharmonic

Above and opposite: In 2014, the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s opening-night concert paid tribute to John Williams (on podium, opposite). Music Director Gustavo Dudamel conducted at the gala, which also featured violinist Itzhak Perlman, trumpets from the U.S. Army, the Los Angeles Children’s Chorus, and members of the Los Angeles Chorale. The festivities included characters from *Star Wars*.

mindboggling. His career in film and television music began half a century ago with titles like *Wagon Train*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, and *The Long Goodbye*. It encompasses franchises such as *Indiana Jones*, *Harry Potter*, *Home Alone*, *Star Wars*, and *Jurassic Park*, and spans 46 years of partnership with Steven Spielberg, from *Sugarland Express* to *The Post*, the longest director-composer collaboration in history, with iconic scores like *Jaws*, *E.T.*, and *Schindler’s List*. Williams’s concert pieces, written for everyone from Seiji Ozawa at the Boston Symphony Orchestra to Barack Obama, for his presidential inauguration in 2009, include works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, and solo

instruments. Williams just keeps writing, and his music seems to get programmed more and more often by orchestras every year.

Orchestras play lots of Williams scores, and of course they also play scores by many other film composers. The big difference: usually the latter are identified by film name or brand franchise, while concerts by orchestras featuring Williams scores are typically just billed as “John Williams” events. In 2006, the League of American Orchestras awarded Williams its highest honor, the Gold Baton, for “inspiring millions of listeners worldwide” with his orchestral music for film, television, and concert hall.” Orchestra galas themed around



Craig Matthew / Los Angeles Philharmonic

Williams's music tend to be successful fundraisers, often with the composer on hand to conduct the orchestra. His music is notably popular with young listeners and families.

Dudamel can now take his own child to a *Star Wars* film, part of a remarkable multigenerational cycle. Constantine

Kitsopoulos, who is currently conducting the scores to four different *Star Wars* films with various orchestras, saw the first one in 1977, "and I thought, 'Who wrote this music?' I went out and bought the soundtrack and proceeded to buy anything by John Williams I could get my hands on." Many

took a tape recorder into the theater, went home, and listened under my pillow at night with tiny speakers, incessantly. Then came *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. If it hadn't been for John Williams, I wouldn't have become a composer. I would have missed out."

### John Williams just keeps writing, and his music seems to get programmed more and more often by orchestras every year.

musicians Kitsopoulos now conducts had a similar experience, he says: "Those films the players experienced when they were kids are becoming new again because they are playing this music—which is so well written." The multigenerational aspect is also true for composers of scores to sequels to *Star Wars* and other films. Composer Michael Giacchino, who has written music for the TV series *Lost* and films including *Up* and *The Incredibles*, scored the sequel films *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* and *Jurassic World*. He saw the original *Star Wars* when he was nine: "It made me wonder, 'How do they actually make this stuff?' There were no DVDs or video, so I had to use the music to re-imagine the film. I

*Star Wars* is only a small part of Williams's huge career, which includes multiple Grammy, Golden Globe, and Academy Awards for his film scores, but his work has a special historical importance in the evolution of movie music. In the mid-'70s, Hollywood producers were talking of eliminating expensive symphonic music and replacing it with pop tunes and synthesizers. The death in 1975 of Bernard Herrmann—composer of landmark scores for *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and many other films—an important mentor to Williams, seemed to signify the end of a sonic tradition. Producer Lou Wasserman had warned director Alfred Hitchcock in 1965 that Herrmann was a dinosaur and that



Eugene Symphony/Amanda L. Smith Photography

Eugene Symphony Music Director Francesco Lecce-Chong, a *Star Wars* fan himself, conducts John Williams's "Throne Room" from *Star Wars* at an outdoor concert in 2017, where he debuted his popular "lightsaber" baton.





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the symphonic tradition he represented was about to become extinct. Williams’s charming Poulencian score for *Family Plot* (1976), the Master’s last film, might be the coda for more than just Hitchcock.

Then *Star Wars* blazed into theaters, winning an Oscar in 1975 for best score, and the gloomy talk stopped. “We used the London Symphony playing in a grand, sweeping style,” Williams recalled to me, “which seemed to all of us working on the film to be the right approach to the film.” He used the same approach with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, *Superman*, and *Indiana Jones*, which erupted during the same period, all huge successes, all powered by large orchestras. Now it’s a given that scale and scope equals orchestra in film.

### Themes and Variations

The magic is still there. When I saw *The Last Jedi* in the theater with my own kids, I remained in my seat, raptly listening to the end-credits music, as I always do in a Williams-scored film. At once delicate and densely layered, it is a typical *Star Wars* score, offering new motifs for story lines and characters—a sprightly one for the character Rose Tico (portrayed by Kelly Marie Tran), a beatific one for Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia (Mark Hamill and Carrie Fisher)—along with variations on themes fans have had in their heads through four decades, the closest thing in modern culture to a *Ring* cycle. Like Bernard Herrmann, Franz Waxman, and other film composers, Williams uses Wagnerian methods that incorporate lush chromaticism and the use of leitmotifs.

It’s safe to say that *The Last Jedi* score has been heard by more people than any new symphonic work, which is what happens when a popular film composer writes

Constantine Kitsopoulos conducts the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra in a film-with-concert version of John Williams’s score to *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, June 2018.



for a hit film. We can deplore this state of affairs, as many purists do, or we can rejoice that Williams has kept symphonic culture alive for a large audience, one that listens as well as watches when they see a Williams-scored movie.

Williams wishes they could simply listen: “As musicians, we don’t like to think that we need visual aids to project music,” he told me wistfully. “It should be able to engage us intellectually and aurally without a visual distraction. I’m painfully aware of that problem.” But he realized long ago that the means of reaching people “more than anything is film, more than records now, and much more than one can achieve with concert appearances.”

Ironically, Williams rarely goes to movies. He grew up listening to radio, which he preferred because he could conjure his own images. This may be one reason his music has such a strong sense of narrative. As Kitsopoulos puts it, Williams has the uncanny ability to “musicalize the human experience. That’s what moves the story forward.” Steven Spielberg claims that with Williams’s scores, “You don’t really need the images to have the story told to you. He is the greatest musical storyteller of all time.”

Director Oliver Stone told me that Williams is “a brilliant conceptualizer,” especially in cases like the 1991 *JFK*, where

he worked on the score before he saw any of Stone’s footage. The issue of how much a composer needs to see before he can work on a film stretches back to the early days of talkies. Traditionally, music to a film is written to fit existing footage. When Franz Waxman was composing his score for Hitchcock’s 1939 *Rebecca*

Composer Michael Giacchino says the soaring crescendos in his *Up* and *Coco* scores are “no accident. John Williams and Steve Spielberg were my teachers; they taught me how to use music and pictures together.”



(the first movie score to be made into a concert suite), producer David Selznick, who was also making *Gone With the Wind* across the street, was frustrated with Max Steiner’s slow progress on scoring that film and with Waxman’s pace with *Rebecca*. “I have maintained for years,” Selznick stated in a grumpy memo, “that the idea that music cannot be written until a picture is finally cut is so much nonsense. It is my conviction that as time goes on, the score of a picture will be written from the script so that by the time a picture has finished

shooting, the score is complete. I think this ought to be hammered into Waxman.”

When I shared the Selznick memo with Williams, he told me excitedly that with *JFK*, he actually “did record several sequences before I saw any film. And Oliver cut some of the film to the music.” Williams calls Selznick’s statement “a marvelous idea in theory, but I think it’s hard to imagine it could work for every scene in every film. People photograph—randomly, if I may use that word—and we don’t have the editorial rhythm of the film until much, much later in the process, way past the photography, and directors mostly find their rhythm in the editing room. In the broad sense of the term, tempo or rhythm in film music is of the essence, and until one has the scenes—not only for inspiration but also for the whole sense of the organic movement of the film—it would be hard to imagine getting all that completely until the editing has been done.”

Williams solved the *JFK* problem by writing music that doesn’t speed up, slow down, or stop for specific moments of action, as music so often does in a film. Whether chorales with long lines or sinister slitherings and glissandos, the music is often continuous through the scene and sustains the same stasis or momentum according to its own internal logic. *JFK* is not the only instance in which Williams composed a score before he had seen all of the film. “You know, a lot of the five-note exchange between the orchestra and synthesizer in *Close Encounters* was pre-recorded,” Williams told me. And *War of the Worlds*, a symphony of dread, was written after Williams saw only six reels. According to Spielberg, Williams “had enough of an experience in those sixty minutes that he knew exactly how to write it.” That’s all he could stand to watch.

### Spielberg, *Jaws*, and Beyond

Williams’s partnership with Spielberg began with the director’s obsession with *The Reivers* (1969, starring Steve McQueen). Spielberg says he had “worn out the LP” of Williams’s score and fantasized about hiring Williams if he ever made a movie, which turned out to be *Sugarland Express* (1974). *Jaws* was the first hit for both of them, though it began disastrously, illustrating the perils of the process. Before Williams composed the music, Spielberg



Henry Scott

John Williams, the Boston Pops’ conductor laureate, conducts the Pops’ “John Williams Film Night,” May 2018. This and other Williams-led performances at orchestras typically sell out.

temped the footage—creating a temporary placeholder score used while the full score is being written that has the right mood and ambiance—with Williams’s score for Robert Altman’s psychological horror film *Images*, which he thought had the right sound. To Williams, it was all wrong: “Oh, darling boy, no no no no,” Williams remembers saying to Spielberg. “*Images* is not the right sound. Let me work something up, and I’ll present it to you.” Williams came back with the terrifying shark ostinato, which he wrote by “envisioning the shark in the water,” but when he played it for Spielberg with two fingers on the piano, like “Chopsticks,” the director thought it was a joke: “This was a horrible production, making *Jaws*, to begin with,” Spielberg recalls. “You don’t know what it was like to make that movie, and now I’m hearing a sound that is nothing like the film in my mind that I’ve made. I said ‘really?’ And John said, ‘Oh no, trust me, that is *Jaws*.’”

This incident bears an uncanny resemblance to another risky movie with another famous motif: *Psycho*, where Hitchcock, who hated the

way the production was going so much that he contemplated cutting the movie up for television, decided to trust Bernard Herrmann and go with the shower cue, though he had forbidden Herrmann to write any music for what he insisted should be a silent scene. In both cases, the composers were right, the directors wrong: the films were spectacular hits, in no small part because of the music, and the directors later gave their composers the credit they deserved.

The word Williams uses to describe



Craig Matthew / Los Angeles Philharmonic

Gustavo Dudamel and John Williams at the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s 2014 opening-night concert, which was a tribute to John Williams.





Eugene Symphony/Amanda L. Smith Photography

The audience gets into the action at a Eugene Symphony park concert in 2018, which featured Music Director Francesco-Lecce Chong leading a program including Williams's Suite from *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*.

himself is "eclecticism." Indeed, there seems to be a new style for each film: the Korngoldian swagger of *Indiana Jones*, the hip syncopation of *Munich* and *Amistad*, the melancholy grandeur of *Born on the*

*Fourth of July*, the icy modernism of *A.I.* (Williams's most underrated score), the moody asperity of *Minority Report* (an homage to Hitchcock-Herrmann), the attenuated Americana of *Saving Private*

*Ryan* and *Lincoln*. "Here's a guy who can write in any style, any style at all," says Kitsopoulos. "Just when I think I've got him, that I get his shorthand, he throws me a curve. It makes learning a new score very satisfying. Right now I'm learning the third *Harry Potter* movie. There's Renaissance music, big band music, big romantic themes, and with each film in the series he's developed new themes to go along."

**"Emotion Without Shame"**

Despite the dizzying variety, there is an identifiable sound, a certain lift that catapults the narratives upward, over the forest in *E.T.*, over floating money in *Catch Me If You Can*, over apocalypse and Holocaust in *Empire of the Sun* and *Schindler's List*. "I think that's who he is," says Kitsopoulos. "When there's a moment that requires a lift, often what happens right before it is a harmonic tension that leads to a resolution. It's not a dominant-tonic resolution that says 'here's the cadence.' It lands on a harmony, and you wonder where it could







Craig Mathew / Los Angeles Philharmonic

John Williams (left), Music Director Gustavo Dudamel (center), and violinist Itzhak Perlman (right) at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's 2014 opening-night concert, paying tribute to Williams.

go, and *then* there's a resolution." With resolution comes euphoria, something rare in modern cinema. Kitsopoulos compares the technique to Beethoven: "I get my students to look at the opening of the Beethoven Seventh; we're used to it, but you always have to look at it in the context

pseudo-*Carmina Burana* bombast in superhero movies, the boilerplate *pizzicato* in comedies—all sound the same. As a conductor, Williams strives for "emotion without shame" in his performances as well: "We try to get everybody to lose gravity, get everybody off the floor," he said

after recording *War Horse*, "Steven and all 90 musicians, get everybody flying." Williams says he initially took up conducting "out of self-defense. It was assumed that the music director who hired the composer would conduct the score. Almost always I felt I could represent the music better. I wanted to bring what I had written to the fore in the most representative way that I thought it could be given. And that was my sole motivation. It had nothing to do with interpreting other people's work. That came to me later." In addition to serving as conductor of the Boston Pops from 1980 to 1993, he has conducted orchestras from the New York Philharmonic and Cleveland Orchestra to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Even flops like *Always* and *Hook* soar as long as the music is playing. In masterpieces like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which Williams told me is his favorite score, the music defines the film, becoming, in Spielberg's conception, "the central character." The three-note motif

**"The orchestra is a fabulous tool," says Williams, "and always has been. There is nothing yet invented that is a better instrument to deliver emotional impact."**

of surprise at the premiere. The first time you see those bicycles take off in *E.T.*, it's mind-blowing."

Michael Giacchino's music has a similar lift, from "The Constant" and "Exodus" in *Lost* (television's most epic score) to the soaring crescendos in *Up* and *Coco*: "It's no accident," says Giacchino. "John and Steve were my teachers; they taught me how to use music and pictures together. They are the gold standard. My favorite lift-off scenes are the boat chase in *Jaws* and the taking off of the plane and opening of the Ark in *Raiders*. It's a massive melodic experience—emotion without shame. Movies today are afraid of that emotional connection. Composers are told to listen to the temp score and write music 'just like that.'"

This lack of emotional connection is why the scores of so many films—the

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In September 2017, John Williams conducted the Seattle Symphony in music from *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Schindler's List*, among other of his film scores. Director Steven Spielberg was on hand to narrate the performance.



The famous two-note shark theme from *Jaws* was once hotly debated by director Steven Spielberg and composer John Williams. After more than 40 years, the music to *Jaws* is widely popular on orchestra concert programs like the ones in 2018 by (top) the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and (above) the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

climbing over trembling strings as Roy and Jillian approach the fateful mountain and gaze upward is a moment of transcendence Williams would reinvent in *E.T.*, *Jurassic Park*, *Empire of the Sun*, and others, a skyward gaze that became Spielberg's fundamental gesture, impossible without Williams's music.

As for the extra-terrestrials' famous five-note greeting, Williams told me that he wrote some 350 versions: "I still have them. Steven and I kept coming back to that one [that ended up in the finished film]. We had a couple of other contenders, but for whatever reason that seemed to be the thing that grabbed us both. But I wrote them out on pieces of paper—just five notes without any rhythmic variations, just five pitches in random order."

This is a method Williams has perfected: the painstaking construction of something large from small, seemingly insignificant motifs, written with pencil and paper. He can also write spontaneously, a gift cultivated during his stint as a jazz pianist in the 1950s. The most famous instance is the sublime violin melody for *Schindler's List*, which emerged as Williams was improvising with Itzhak Perlman: "I'm sitting at the piano and just creating those themes, and I was as much

trying to write something that suited the film as I was trying to create a particular idiom in the Eastern European Jewish style for Itzhak to play—a wonderful combination of opportunities."



Amanda L. Smith

Lightsabers were popular at "Eugene Symphony in the Park" in July 2018, where the program featured Williams's Suite from *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. Above, Eugene Symphony Principal Trombone Henry Henninger (right) battles with Maddie Diaz as a bystander looks on.





John Williams's music to the *Harry Potter* films is just as familiar as its plot and characters. Above: a scene from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Like the *Schindler* theme, the melodies that stick in our heads are often solos: the bluesy flute in *Sugarland Express*, the bebop saxophone in *Catch Me If You Can*, the lonely trumpet in *Born on the Fourth of July*, the playful clarinet in *The Terminal*. Many of the film scores resemble concertos, a form Williams has emphasized in his career as a concert composer. He values "the association with the soloists, the wonderful inspiration from players... an antidote to the monastic life style of a composer." Among others, he has written a spiky concerto for Judith LeClair, principal bassoon of the New York Philharmonic; two cello concertos for Yo-Yo Ma, who also spins the intricate textures in *Memoirs of a Geisha*; a concerto for Michael Sachs, principal trumpet of the Cleveland Orchestra; a concerto for Dale Clevenger, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's former principal horn; and a concerto for former Boston Symphony Orchestra tubist Chester Schmitz, as a 100th-anniversary commission from the Boston Pops.

Symphonic film music continues to be threatened by the lure of samples and synthesizers, a siren call that never quite stops. Nonetheless, the success of the newest *Star Wars* scores demonstrates that the force is strong with this one. "The orchestra is a fabulous tool," says Williams, "and always has been, and still is very much with us. It isn't applicable to every film that comes along, but when it's needed there is nothing yet invented that is a better instrument to deliver emotional impact."

Williams told me that the composer he admires most is Haydn, whose C Major String Quartet, Op. 64, No. 1, plays serenely through the sinister greenhouse scene in *Minority Report*. Haydn is "one of the all-time great musical talents. Without

Haydn, we probably wouldn't have Mozart or Beethoven." One wonders if there is a more personal resonance, perhaps unconscious: like Haydn, Williams is a household name straddling two centuries, a populist and a meticulous artist, astonishingly prolific even in his later years. Now 86, he is completing new concertos for Anne-Sophie Mutter and Yo-Yo Ma and planning another *Star Wars* score. According to Giacchino, Williams lives for composition: "He *has* to write every day." To questions about when he plans to retire, Williams expresses happy bewilderment: "Retire from music? You might as well retire from breathing." **S**

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