

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

John Williams has been the pre-eminent composer of Hollywood film music for more than four decades. The son of a film studio musician, he grew up studying first piano and then trombone, trumpet, and clarinet. When his family moved to Los Angeles, in 1948, he began working with the jazz pianist and arranger Bobby Van Eps. During the early 1950s, he did a stint in the Air Force (conducting and arranging for bands) and studied piano at The Juilliard School with Rosina Lhévinne for a year. Later that decade, he was a composition pupil of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and Arthur Olaf Andersen.

Williams orchestrated numerous feature films in the 1960s and by the 1970s had emerged as an important film-score composer in his own right. Ronald Neame's *The Poseidon Adventure* (1973) marked one of his first incontrovertible successes, but his breakthrough came two years later with the Steven Spielberg blockbuster *Jaws*. Williams became that director's composer of choice, providing music that would mirror, support, and advance the action and emotional states depicted in his films. A selective list of

Williams's scores for more than 20 Spielberg films includes many "must-hear" entries, including *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Lincoln*. The composer concurrently maintained close working relationships with other leading directors, including Alfred Hitchcock (*A Family Plot*), Oliver Stone (*Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*), and Rob Marshall (*Memoirs of a Geisha*).

Apart from Spielberg, the director-producer with whom Williams is most identified is George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* series. It began as a trilogy: *Star Wars*, in 1977 (retitled *Star Wars: A New Hope* upon its re-release four years later); *The Empire Strikes Back*, in 1980; and *Return of the Jedi*, in 1983. That sequence was later expanded by a "prequel trilogy" — *The Phantom Menace*, in 1999; *Attack of the Clones*, in 2002; and *Revenge of the Sith*, in 2005 — and is now being worked through a "sequel trilogy," of which the first installment, *The Force Awakens*,

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** February 8, 1932, in Flushing, Queens, New York

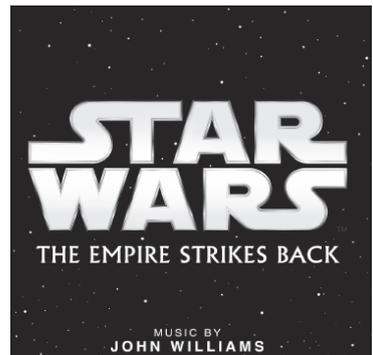
**Resides:** in Los Angeles, California

**Work composed:** 1980

**World premiere:** The film *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* was released June 20, 1980.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the World Premiere of the score performed live to the complete film

**Estimated duration:** ca. 129 minutes



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## Star Wars: A Musical Language

John Williams was impressed by George Lucas's script for *Star Wars* (later subtitled *A New Hope*) when he first read it. "I thought the film would give me the opportunity to write an old-fashioned swashbuckling symphonic score," he said, and he convinced Lucas to opt for a completely original sound track rather than assemble one from existing classical compositions, as Stanley Kubrick had done with *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Williams explained:

What the technique of using pre-existing classical music doesn't do is to allow for a piece of melodic material to be fully developed and related to a character all the way through a film. ... For formal reasons, I felt that this particular film wanted such thematic unity.



Luke Skywalker embarks on his journey to become a Jedi in *The Empire Strikes Back*; Princess Leia and Han Solo move toward romance; Darth Vader invites Luke to embrace the Dark Side.

Williams accordingly formulated about a dozen memorable, easily recognizable themes, each associated with a specific character or situation. These ideas could be revisited and worked into the evolving musical texture as the saga unrolled, in the manner of the leitmotifs famously employed as a structural and narrative element in the operas of Richard Wagner — works to which the *Star Wars* movies are frequently compared. Now instantly recognizable themes introduced in *A New Hope* include the sometimes quiet, sometimes heroic "The Force Theme," which underscores the scene in which a contemplative Luke Skywalker gazes out upon the binary sunset, and also accompanies the first appearance of Obi-Wan Kenobi; Princess Leia's romantic, yet regal theme; and the low-pitched "Imperial Motif," which presages the ominous "Imperial March" associated with Darth Vader, introduced in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Indeed, Williams's score does have a Wagnerian cast, employing a large symphony orchestra with unmistakable grandeur. The goal was not to emphasize the futuristic aspects of the film, which might have invited electronic effects or extended instrumental techniques. Instead, Williams wrote original music that did not disguise its kinship to such earlier symphonic masters as Wagner, Bruckner, Stravinsky, or Korngold. In this sense, it mirrors the stance of the film itself, which is unquestionably set in the land of sci-fi but also draws on more traditional Hollywood genres, from swashbuckling adventure epic to gun-slinging Western.

appeared in 2015, the second, *The Last Jedi*, is set to open on December 15, 2017 — and the third, the ninth *Star Wars* film, is still in development.

Often working at a pace of about two films per year, Williams has now completed more than 100 scores, not counting television movies, shorts, or adaptations. He has been recognized with an impressive succession of honors, among them fifty Oscar nominations and four Academy Awards for Best Original Score (for *Jaws*, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, *E.T.*, and *Schindler's List*), plus another for Best Scoring Adaptation and Original Song Score (*Fiddler on*

*the Roof*), four Golden Globes, three Emmys, and 23 Grammys, in addition to induction into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame (in 2000), a Kennedy Center Honor (in 2004), and the National Medal of Arts (2009). In 2016 he became the first composer to receive the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award.

When director and writer George Lucas was creating the original *Star Wars* film in 1977, his friend Steven Spielberg recommended that he hire John Williams to compose an original score. The film was an immense success, and Williams's score became an instant classic in its own right; the

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## In the Composer's Words

In an interview, John Williams spoke about recording the music for *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* and how the score connects to what preceded it while moving forward as an original piece:

I wrote and recorded nearly two hours of music for *The Empire Strikes Back*. My intention was to develop new material that would wed with the original and sound like part of an organic whole: something different, something new, but an extension of what existed for the first film. So in the creation of new themes and in the handling of the original material, the task, both in concept and instrumentation, was one of extending something that I had written three years before.

(Williams's scores for films in the *Star Wars* saga are recognized for their emphasis on brass instrumentation, and New York Philharmonic brass players are enthusiastic about performing *The Empire Strikes Back* score in real time to a complete screening of the film. For more on the particular challenges of Williams's music and how it has influenced musicians, see "The Force of *Star Wars*," page 10.)



C-3PO, R2-D2, Luke, and Leia in the final scene that sets up action for *Return of the Jedi*

movie was honored with six Oscars, including for Best Original Score.

When the time came to continue the saga in *The Empire Strikes Back* — now with Lucas as executive producer and Irvin Kershner as director — Williams was again an integral part of the team. The earlier score had included numerous musical themes associated with specific characters, and these were carried over to the new film. But Williams created entirely new themes, too. Some of the most memorable among them are music to accompany the beloved Yoda (a new character), a leitmotif for “Han Solo and the Princess,” additional music for the robotic C-3PO and R2-D2, and Darth Vader’s ominous “Imperial March.”

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (two doubling piccolo, and one doubling piccolo and alto flute), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet, another doubling E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), six horns, three trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, xylophone, vibraphone, chimes, two snare drums, military drum, field drum, tuned drums, low / deep drum, two bass drums, tam-tam, anvil, triangle, timbales, gong, cymbals, suspended cymbal, sizzle cymbal, bongos, congas, ratchet, whip, harp, piano (doubling celeste), and strings.

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## Listen for ... Drums and Bells

John Williams deploys an extensive array of percussion instruments in his score for *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, including a variety of drums, cymbals, bells, a whip, and even an anvil. Snare drums provide the unmistakable militaristic drive of “The Imperial March” and perform a similar function in “The Battle in the Snow.” However, throughout the score Williams also uses absolute contrasts in tone, pairing low drums with triangle, chimes, and the ethereal sound of the celeste (best known from “The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” in Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker*.) He particularly calls upon orchestra bells (below, also known as the *glockenspiel*) to provide the ringing, crystalline sound of deep space, and to strike a hopeful note for the Rebel Alliance. Orches-



tra bells are a set of tuned metal plates arranged as a keyboard and struck with mallet.

New York Philharmonic Principal Percussion Christopher S. Lamb notes that an even wider array of percussion — drums, gourds, rattles, and more — makes a large statement in the next installment of the *Star Wars* saga, *Return of the Jedi*, to be performed by the Orchestra live to a complete screening of the film, October 4–5.

— The Editors