

Notes on the Program

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

The pre-eminent composer of Hollywood film music for more than four decades, John 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 *Star Wars* creator George Lucas. 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*, 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 Music, Scoring Adaptation and Original Song Score (*Fiddler on the Roof*), four Golden Globes, three

IN SHORT

John Williams

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

Resides: in Los Angeles, California

Work composed: 2015

World premiere: The film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was released December 18, 2015, following a preview screening four days earlier in Los Angeles.

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

Estimated duration: ca. 139 minutes

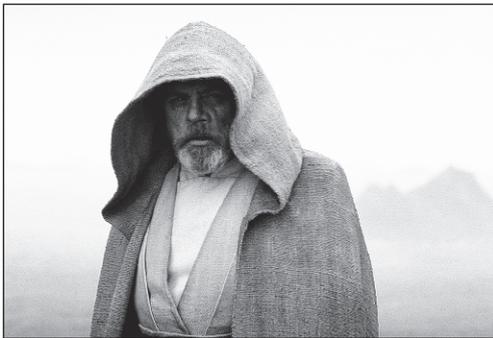


Star Wars: A Musical Language

John Williams was impressed by George Lucas's script for the original *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.

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*



With the *The Force Awakens*, John Williams continues to build a universe of musical motifs for characters familiar and new, from Luke Skywalker to *Rey* and her cohort, BB-8.

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 scores do have a Wagnerian cast, employing a large symphony orchestra with unmistakable grandeur. The goal was not to emphasize the futuristic aspects of the films, 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 films themselves, which are unquestionably set in the land of sci-fi but also draw on more traditional Hollywood genres, from swashbuckling adventure epic to gun-slinging Western.

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 movie was honored with six Oscars, including one for Williams's music.

The Force Awakens is set three decades later than its plot-predecessor, *Return of the*

Jedi — a chronology happily mirrored by real-world time, since 32 years actually separated the releases of the two films. George Lucas had sold his production company to The Walt Disney Company in 2012, but the spirit of the earlier installments was carefully maintained. Naturally, this extended to the music. The film's director and co-producer, J.J. Abrams, wrote:

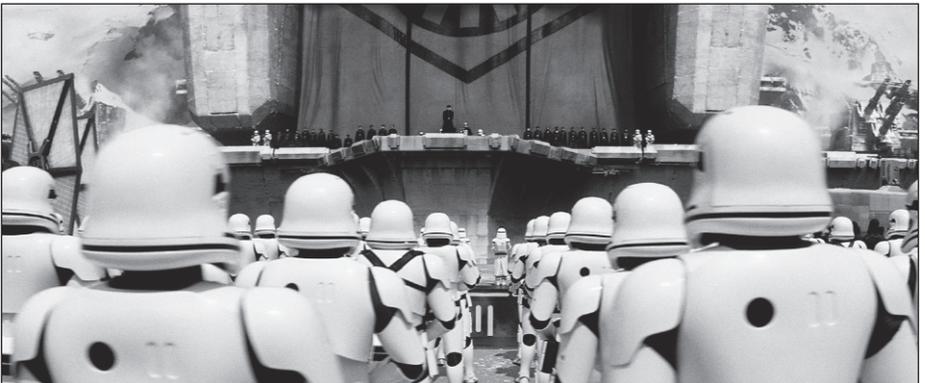
John's score for *The Force Awakens* is achingly wonderful. The majesty and beauty of "Rey's Theme," the darkness and threat of Ren's, the lift and exuberance of the "Resistance Theme" It is all brand new and yet an inevitable continuation of his *Star Wars* oeuvre.

Williams's Method

In 2015, when John Williams composed the music for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 38 years had passed since he had written the score for the original *Star Wars*. For most composers, the nuts and bolts of creating and notating a musical score had changed a great deal during that time, with various software programs replacing time-honored writing implements. But this was not the case for Williams, as he explains:

I work very much in what some would consider the old school, in front of the piano with pencil and paper. Over the decades there have been so many extraordinary technological advances in the music business, but I've been so busy that I never really retooled.

On the other hand, Williams has not been averse to calling for synthesizers as a texture in his later *Star Wars* scores. Still, he employs electronic manipulation to achieve occasional atmospheric and coloristic effects in scores that are otherwise almost entirely orchestral.



Stormtroopers rally under the First Order.

Although Williams does make a few references to themes from earlier episodes in the saga, nearly all of this score's material is indeed brand new. He explains:

My task and my challenge was to make it feel friendly and interrelated to the other scores, so that it feels comfortably within the *Star Wars* universe, yet at the same time make it new and original to this particular piece.

Instrumentation: three flutes (all doubling piccolo, two doubling alto flute), three oboes

(one doubling English horn), four clarinets (two doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), six horns, three trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, chimes, two snare drums, military drum, field drum, tuned drums, two bass drums, low / deep drum, taiko drum, tomtoms, tam-tam, anvil, triangle, timbales, tambourine, bell tree, gong, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, sizzle cymbal, bongos, conga drums, ratchet, whip, harp, piano, synthesizer, and strings.

In the Composer's Words

When we did the initial recording in London in 1977, I didn't have any inkling that there would be a second film or, let alone, a third film. I thought that *Star Wars* would be a wonderful sort of Saturday afternoon show for the entire family, and then in a few weeks it would be gone.

And what happened, of course, is that it ignited in some way. The wonderful historian Joseph Campbell explained how the mythological elements of the story struck the psyches of people worldwide. But that came later. I certainly couldn't have predicted this when we made the film, but the magnetism of the piece itself became so powerful and so appealing to people, maybe billions of people by now.

When I've returned over the years to work on subsequent *Star Wars* films, I've always felt that it is a bit like getting back on your teenage bicycle, which you haven't forgotten how to ride, and it takes only a few hours to get back in the swing of the modalities of the prior films. I hope people will find that the music for these later installments is fresh and new, but at the same time interrelated with the earlier material that has become so familiar and so often performed.

— John Williams



Chewbacca and Han Solo return in *The Force Awakens*.