

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*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 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 working through a "sequel trilogy," of which the

IN SHORT

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

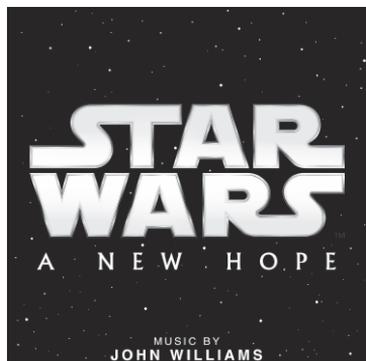
Resides: in Los Angeles, California

Work composed: 1976–77

World premiere: The film *Star Wars* (later titled *A New Hope*) was released on May 25, 1977.

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

Estimated duration: ca. 125 minutes



Star Wars: A Musical Language

John Williams was impressed by George Lucas's script for *Star Wars* 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 observes the binary sunset over Tatooine; Princess Leia teams up with Luke and Han Solo; Obi-Wan Kenobi confronts Darth Vader.

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 film 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.

first installment, *The Force Awakens*, appeared in 2015, and 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 the original *Star Wars* film was released, in 1977, science fiction was not an especially popular cinematic genre. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968) may be viewed as classics today, but they were slow to gain a commercial following. Lucas made the rounds of major studios before Twentieth Century Fox finally took on his project. Lucas initially planned to follow the model of *2001* and devise a sound

In the Composer's Words

Because the opening of the film was visually so stunning, it was clear that the music had to do something very strong. I tried to construct something that would have an idealistic, uplifting, but somewhat military flair, set in the most brilliant register of the trumpets, horns, and trombones, so that there would be a blazingly bright fanfare right at the opening of the piece which would then be contrasted by a second theme that was more lyrical, romantic, and adventurous. The intent also was to give the theme a kind of ceremonial quality — very nearly a march but not quite — something that might inspire you to want to stand up and salute when you hear it.

— John Williams

(New York Philharmonic brass players are equally enthusiastic about performing the score in real time to a complete screening of the film. For more on the particular challenges of playing Williams's brass music and how it has influenced musicians, see "The Force of *Star Wars*," page 10.)



The main theme reappears triumphantly in the "Throne Room" finale.

track from classical selections. But his friend Spielberg suggested a different tack, according to Lucas:

I had known Steven Spielberg for a long time up to this point, and ... I said, "I want a classical score, I want the Korngold kind of feel about this thing, it's an old fashioned kinda movie and I want that kind of grand sound track they used to have on the movies." And he said, "The guy you gotta talk to is John Williams. He made *Jaws*, I love him, he is the greatest composer who ever lived."

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo, another doubling piccolo and alto flute), two oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one 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, low drum, bass drum, tam-tam, anvil, triangle, timbales, tambourine, bell tree, low wood block, slapstick, cymbals, suspended cymbal, sizzle cymbal, finger cymbals, logs, boobams, claves, harp, piano (doubling celeste), and strings.

Listen for ... the Boobam

Boobam? This rhythmically named instrument — a frame-mounted set of tuned bongos — is just one member of the percussion battery John Williams deploys in his score for *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Boobams take their name from a scrambled spelling of bamboo, as the tubes were originally made of large bamboo pipes, with the varying lengths providing the tuning. The instrument became popular with jazz and popular groups after the founding of BooBam Bamboo Drum Company in 1954 in Sausalito, California.



A variety of drums, cymbals, bells, a slapstick (two wood slats used to make a loud "smack!" — from which the form of comic antics takes its name), and even an anvil can be heard sprinkled throughout the score. Yet New York Philharmonic Principal Percussion Christopher S. Lamb notes that percussion makes an even larger statement in *Return of the Jedi*, the third film of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, which employs an even wider variety of drums, gourds, and rattles. The boobams you hear tonight, rented for the occasion, will stick around for those performances October 4 and 5.

— The Editors