

Notes on the Program

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

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

John Williams

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is the most profoundly musical of movies. Science fiction (or “science speculation,” as director Steven Spielberg likes to call it) thrives on the idea that intelligent life may exist somewhere out there in the universe and that humankind would recognize it if we chanced upon it.

So then what? In novels or film, the answer often assumes the form of warfare, with the endgame being brute domination. But Spielberg took a different tack. Preternaturally drawn to what he (and everyone else) describes as an essentially childlike sense of wonder, he imagined a hopeful conclusion marked by communication. But how could exorbitantly different beings communicate? He mused in the documentary *Steven Spielberg: 30 Years of Close Encounters*,

Well, mathematics is a way of communicating with perhaps another species from off the planet, but mathematics is

also music. I thought, wouldn't it be great if the math basically is music-math and they start to communicate with each other through lights, colors, and musical tones.

Spielberg knew who to turn to for assistance with the musical tones. John Williams has been the pre-eminent composer of Hollywood film music for so long now — more than four decades and counting — that it's easy to forget he wasn't always the go-to choice for a director. After working as a jazz pianist and arranger in Los Angeles, conducting bands in the Air Force, and studying piano at Juilliard, he broke into the film-music business as an orchestrator in the 1960s and '70s and scored his first major successes with Ronald Neame's *The Poseidon Adventure* (1973) and Spielberg's aquatic thriller *Jaws* (in 1975, a year after their first collaboration on *The Sugarland Express*). From then on, Williams became Spielberg's composer of choice, providing music to mirror, sup-



Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) has a first encounter

In Short

Born: February 8, 1932, in Flushing, Queens

Resides: in Los Angeles, California

Work composed: 1977

World premiere: The film was premiered November 15, 1977, in New York City.

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

Estimated duration: ca. 135 minutes

port, 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 *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*.

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, the first installment of which was *Star Wars*, in 1977 (later retitled *Star Wars: A New Hope*). Since then the franchise has grown to encompass nine installments, with the latest, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, planned for release this December. Williams 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*).

Often working at a pace of about two film scores per year, Williams has now completed

more than 100, not counting television movies, shorts, or adaptations. He has been recognized with an impressive succession of honors, among them 50 Oscar nominations and four Academy Awards for Best Music 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 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 AFI (American Film Institute) Life Achievement Award.

Groupies know what the title *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* means, but some viewers may appreciate a review session. In his 1972 book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry*, the astronomer J. Allen Hynek defined three categories of UFO sightings. The First Kind involves nearby visual sighting; the Second Kind includes some physical effect, such as physical sensation, electrical interference, or a chemical trace; and the Third

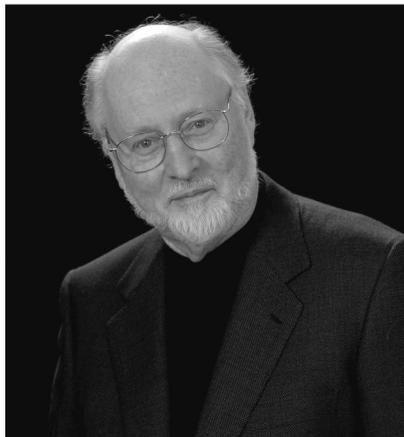
In the Composer's Words

Over the years, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* has remained one of my favorite Steven Spielberg films.

With its depiction of the long-awaited visit of the radiant and loving extraterrestrials, the fascinating premonitions of the little boy, and the five-note musical motif used to communicate with our otherworldly guests, the film offered a rich and unusual canvas on which to present the music.

I'm indebted to Steven for the opportunity he offered me through this exceptional film and am delighted that audiences now can enjoy this very special movie live in concert, accompanied by a magnificent orchestra like the New York Philharmonic.

— John Williams



Kind refers to encounters in which some animated creature is present on the UFO.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling alto flute) and piccolo, two oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (two doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, xylophone,

vibraphone, marimba, chimes, congas, boobams, deep drums, log drums, muffled drums, tom-toms, tuned drums, tuned logs, field drum, snare drum, bass drum, anvil, triangles, bell tree, bowed metal, cymbals, sizzle cymbal, suspended cymbal, gongs, tam-tam, bamboo sticks, cabasa, claves, maracas, rattles, scraper, slapstick, waterphone, harp, piano (doubling celesta), synthesizer, and mixed chorus.

Listen for . . . the “Doorbell”



Communicating with the mothership

The touchstone of John Williams's score is a musical kernel of five notes. In his book *Close Encounters of the Third Kind: The Making of Steven Spielberg's Classic Film*, Ray Morton reports that, at first

Williams asked if he could use seven tones instead of five, feeling that it would be easier to develop a melody if he could use more notes, but Steven said no. He didn't

want a melody, he wanted a signal — in his words, “a doorbell.”

Composer and director then worked through some 300 five-note combinations (another Spielberg account places the number at about 100), but they kept coming back to one particular combination: D–E–C–C'–G (or Re–Mi–Do–low Do–Sol in solfège). Morton elaborates:

One of the things that appealed to Williams about this sequence of tones was that it ended on Sol, the fifth note of the musical scale. Sol is a dominant note — the one from which a resolution takes place. By leaving the sequence unresolved, they created great anticipation in the audience as they left it hanging, waiting for a response.

It's not clear if Williams or Spielberg have addressed another connection, between this motif and a brief scene set in the Mexican desert — a seemingly arbitrary choice of location. “El sol salió anoche y me cantó,” says an old man, meaning “The sun came out last night and sang to me.” He says this before the alien visitors have been exposed to the five-note signal in the film's narrative, but the motif has already been heard in the film score, suggesting that it hovers in the ether generally. Literary analysts might find irresistible the correspondence of sol (sun) with sol (the musical pitch, the same term in Spanish as in English), with the old man referring to both meanings simultaneously.