ABOUT THE SCORE

John Williams did not compose his *Star Wars* scores for the concert hall...but he did compose them with a concert hall mentality. George Lucas wrote his original 1977 script while listening to and taking inspiration from great works of the classical repertoire, and when he hired Williams to score the film, that kind of music — symphonic, grand, *aged* — felt like it had always belonged inside his new universe. The *Star Wars* cosmos now contains eight full-length scores by Williams, written over the course of more than 40 years, amounting to a "space opera" that rivals Wagner's *Ring Cycle* in its ambition and motivic wealth. Williams was thoroughly steeped in the classical and operatic traditions, and he applied the former's symphonic grandeur and the latter's leitmotif architecture to these films — creating and codifying a uniquely "*Star Wars*-ian" language that is instantly recognizable, and whose influence not only in film music but in popular culture is impossible to measure.

One of Lucas' goals with *Star Wars* was taking the normally futuristic trappings of space fiction and rooting them in the old and familiar. From the muddy, lived-in look of spaceships to the hero's-journey archetypes, Lucas' version of the "future" was presented as ancient history. He recognized that symphonic music, particularly in the European style of the 19th and early 20th centuries, would help further cast the spell. The movie was also inspired by the *Flash Gordon* serials of his childhood and Errol Flynn swashbucklers like *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the latter of which had scores by Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Both used brassy classical flourishes to heighten the escapades: the orchestra directly mirrored the action and ended up telling its own parallel story.

When he went looking for a composer, Lucas told his friend Steven Spielberg: "I want a classical score," he recounted in a 1995 interview with Leonard Maltin. "I want the Korngold kind of feel about this thing. It's an old-fashioned kind of movie, and I want that grand soundtrack that you used to have on movies." Spielberg's response: "The guy you've got to talk to is John Williams. He did *Jaws*. I love him. He's the greatest composer who ever lived."

Williams had already been in the Hollywood game for two decades when Lucas reached out to him in 1976, having received two Academy Awards® and 11 Oscar nominations. A New York native, he began studying the piano at age 7 and was composing and conducting by the time he reached North Hollywood High School (having moved so that his father, a jazz drummer, could play with film studio orchestras). He conducted and arranged for military bands during his three-year service in the Air Force, then resumed his studies at The Juilliard School, moonlighting as a jazz pianist in New York nightclubs. These disparate skills — a deep well of classical knowledge, a chameleonic ability to arrange in different musical languages, and a jazzman's knack for intoxicating an audience with infectious melodies and complex harmonies — tilled a mind positively fertile for scoring films.

He first developed his screen-scoring muscles in the 1950s and '60s as a session pianist for other composers — among them, Henry Mancini and Bernard Herrmann — then began composing original scores for television series such as *Checkmate* and *Lost in Space.* Having adapted his voice for nearly every genre on the small screen, he quickly built an impressive career in film, working with the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Altman and Clint Eastwood. And then, of course, he gave frightening musical life to the first modern blockbuster — *Jaws* — for Spielberg.

"George felt that the music should be on a fairly familiar emotional level," the composer wrote in his liner notes for the original soundtrack LP. "At one point, George talked of integrating selections from the classical repertoire with the score. *2001* and several other films have utilized this technique very well. But what I think this technique doesn't do is take a piece of melodic material, develop it and relate it to a character all the way through the film. I felt that the film wanted thematic unity. I believed we needed melodic themes of our own which I could sort of bend around and put through all the permutations."

Star Wars wasn't science-fiction in the cerebral sense of Ray Bradbury or Stanley Kubrick, so a new term was coined — "space opera" — which acknowledged the galactic setting and alien trappings, as well as the grand themes of heroes and villains, romance, family secrets, life and death. In the style popularized by Wagner, every melody in *Star Wars* tells a story: you can actually hear Luke fighting Darth Vader, or calling on the Force, or talking to Princess Leia through the dramatic interplay and development of their themes. "It was not music that might describe *terra incognita* but the opposite of that," Williams once explained, "music that would put us in touch with very familiar and remembered emotions, which for me as a musician translated into the use of a 19th-century operatic idiom, if you like, Wagner and this sort of thing. These sorts of influences would put us in touch with remembered theatrical experiences as well."

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Star Wars came out on May 25, 1977. "When we did the first film, I really thought that it was good and that it would play out for the summer for young people," Williams recalled in 2015. "But I didn't have any idea that it would go beyond the first film. I just left *Star Wars* and went over to *Close Encounters [of the Third Kind]* and didn't think I'd ever see or hear it again." Instead, Williams helped elevate what might have just been "*Buck Rogers* popcorn" into high art.

Star Wars also helped revive symphonic scoring in films, after a decade of jazz and rock dominating movie soundtracks. Williams' scores inspired countless imitators and ushered in a neo-neo-classical renaissance at the movies. And if you talk to a film composer or orchestra musician today, there's a good chance they'll say it all began with *Star Wars.* "Imagine my gratification at the success that this thing has had, in terms of worldwide affection with which it's held," Williams said. "And it seemed to increase over the years as we did it. Only time is going tell us the real currency and the real value of anything that we do. If anything has a permanence of any kind, we have to feel that it's a contribution that must be giving people something they need at some level. That's what we all need to do — is not work, but contribute."

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