

# “Star Wars”--John Williams (1977)

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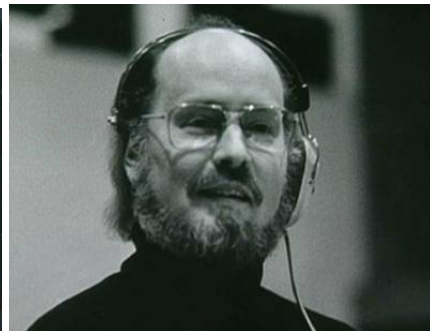
Essay by Emilio Audissino, Ph.D. (guest post)\*



Original album



Original label



John Williams

The Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi once wrote, “Let us turn to the past: that will be progress.” This is what John Williams did with his score to “Star Wars” (George Lucas, 1977), and this is why this score has been so important in the history of film music and cinema. Apart from the huge popularity and the many awards, Williams’s “Star Wars” is a milestone because it was instrumental in reviving the musical style of the Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s to 1950s), and was seminal in boosting a new interest for symphonic film music.

“Star Wars” was released on May 25, 1977. At that time, the Sci-Fi genre was anything but popular: the so-called New Hollywood favored realistic stories mostly set in the present. Moreover, Lucas’s film was not adult Sci-Fi--as was the case with the cryptic “2001: A Space Odyssey” (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)--but a sort of fairy tale set in outer space and mixing elements from the Western and Eastern cultures. Indeed, the film was reluctantly financed by 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox as a low-budget project and opened in less than 40 theaters around the country. Music was another gamble on Lucas’s part. He didn’t want atonal or electronic music--the idioms typically associated with the Sci-Fi genre--and he didn’t want any pop music or theme song--the dominant trend in Hollywood in those days. (Indeed, film studios needed to beef-up the decreasing box-office revenues with the sales of tie-in LPs of pop music and songs, more or less openly advertised in the films.) Lucas opted for an old-fashioned symphonic score, which was even less popular than the Sci-Fi genre at the time. After considering using a score compiled from the concert and film music classics, he made the acquaintance of John Williams, who talked him into using an original score.

Williams (born in Flushing, Queens, NY, on February 8, 1932) had already won two Oscars--for the musical direction of “Fiddler on the Roof” (Norman Jewison, 1971) and for his ground-breaking score to “Jaws” (Steven Spielberg, 1975)--and was much respected in Hollywood, having honed his skills in television and cinema productions for almost 20 years. More important, Williams had already showed that he could write symphonic music in the classical Hollywood style for such films as “The Reivers” (Mark Rydell, 1969), “The Cowboys” (Mark Rydell, 1972), and “Jaws.” Lucas and Williams agreed on using a tonal approach based on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century symphonic idiom. In Williams’s words, “The music for the film is very non-futuristic. The films themselves showed us characters we hadn’t seen before and planets unimagined and so on, but the music was--this is actually George Lucas’ conception and a very good one--emotionally familiar. It was not music that might describe *terra incognita* but the opposite of that, 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.” On March 5, 1977, at the Anvil Studios in Denham (UK), Williams conducted 86 players of the London Symphony Orchestra in the first of 16 recording sessions of the over 800-page score.

The music abounds in references to the works of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Richard Strauss, Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, Gustav Holst, William Walton, and, like the classical Hollywood music of the 1930s and 40s, the score is rich in leitmotifs--a’ la Wagner through the Hollywood tradition—and is lushly orchestrated and highly coloristic, and follows tightly and extensively the visual actions and narrative lines. The music covers almost the entirety of the 121 minutes of running time. And it is the music that opens the film powerfully with the famous “Main Title” and its unforgettably compelling initial gesture: a big *tutti* orchestral chord, a symphonic explosion that peremptorily reinstated symphonic film music in contemporary cinema. Williams explained:

The opening of the film was visually so stunning, with that lettering that comes out and the spaceships and so on, that it was clear that that music had to kind of smack you right in the eye and do something very strong. It's in my mind a very simple, very direct tune that jumps an octave in a very dramatic way, and has a triplet placed in it that has a kind of grab. I tried to construct something that again would have this idealistic, uplifting but military flare to it. [...] And try to get it so it's set in the most brilliant register of the trumpets, horns and trombones so that we'd have a blazingly brilliant fanfare at the opening of the piece. And contrast that with the second theme that was lyrical and romantic and adventurous also. And give it all a kind of ceremonial...it's not a march but very nearly that.

Some reviewers did not understand why Romantic music had been used instead of “Sci-Fi music”—that is, modernistic electronic or atonal music—and some critics blamed Williams for stealing from the classics—critics that failed to appreciate a highly creative reworking and a very personal synthesis that is unmistakably Williams’s. Yet, the music, like the film, was a resounding hit: in mid-July 1977, the 74-minute double LP had already sold 650,000 copies and grossed \$9 million. It would eventually sell more than 4 million copies, becoming the best-selling symphonic album of all time. (Originally, 20th Century-Fox Records had nearly decided not to release any LP of the score, believing that nobody would buy a symphonic film-music album.) Williams won his third Academy Award, one Golden Globe and three Grammy Awards--also receiving a Grammy nomination for “Album of the Year,” something that was unprecedented for an album of symphonic film music. The symphonic suite from the score, premiered by Zubin Mehta and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra on November 20, 1977, would soon become a standard in America’s concert programs. The score was so popular as to inspire Meco (Domenico Monardo) to produce a highly successful disco version, the 1977 LP “Star Wars and Other Galactic Funk.” In 2005, the American Film Institute voted it the best American film score of all time. The vast popularity of the “Star Wars” score led Williams to be named 19<sup>th</sup> musical director of the Boston Pops Orchestra in 1980, the first time a Hollywood composer was appointed to such an important musical position. Williams’s 14-year tenure in Boston was seminal in bringing the best of the film-music repertoire to the concert hall. In the film industry, the “Star Wars” score launched a neoclassical symphonic trend that has rivalled the pop-music trend both in the film theaters and in the recording market.

Though outstanding per se, the 1977 “Star Wars” score is only the tip of an exceptional artistic iceberg, the first chapter of a unique film-music *magnum opus* consisting of six episodes and featuring circa twelve hours of music. Williams has been working on the “Star Wars” saga for his entire career. And the journey is not over yet: in 2013, the 81-year old composer announced that he would score the forthcoming “Episode 7,” due in December 2015. Because of its vast impact and long-term influence, its narrative acumen and musical richness, the “Star Wars” music is likely to be the most important film score ever written, and its best-seller LP album a turning point for the film-music record market.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.