



# NY Philharmonic Serves Up “Star Wars” To Rapturous Fans

By Michael Glitz – September 16, 2017

Classical composers were the rock stars of their day, we’ve often been told (or shown, in the case of the film *Amadeus*). Operas caused riots! And surely any major orchestra has enjoyed stirring moments of rapturous applause at times, say, when introducing a new symphony or delivering an especially thrilling rendition of a classic or under-appreciated gem. Surely the halls of Lincoln Center have rung with cheers many many times over the years.

Still, it’s not that often the hall resounds with joyous noise the way it did on Friday night when the New York Philharmonic launched the Star Wars Film Concert Series with a screening of the original *Star Wars* while the New York Philharmonic performed the score for a packed, sold-out house. People came in costumes. Parents came with their children (and pointed out the various instruments and such, a father next to me giving his son a little running commentary “now, that’s the conductor” and such). Then the lights dimmed and people cheered because the movie was about to begin. They gave hearty applause to the concertmaster/first violinist of a sort I’m sure she rarely hears. They cheered even more when the conductor arrived. They went absolutely crazy for the fanfare that accompanies the logo of 20th Century Fox. Then came a brief pause and that thunderbolt of an opening from composer John Williams burst out of the orchestra as the logo for *Star Wars* splashed across the screen and that’s when the cheering *really* got loud.

The audience was in a great mood despite chaotic lines to get in as Lincoln Center apparently worked out the bugs of a new security system as elaborate and laborious (and time-consuming) as any airport terminal. (Indeed, as showtime approached they gave up and just began waving people through or the evening would have been delayed a good half hour). The audience gave entrance applause to every major character, cheered as the orchestra launched into the major themes and stood and cheered at intermission and again at the end, staying till every last note of the closing credits had been delivered with verve and undisguised glee by the tired but buoyant musicians. Numerous screenings are sold out but you can beg for a ticket out front or snap up what’s remaining by checking out the website for the Star Wars Film Concert Series.

It must still tickle conductor David Newman when people cheer for the logo of 20th Century Fox and that iconic fanfare, the greatest of any Hollywood studio. After all, it was composed by his father Alfred Newman when he was the in-house god of film scores there. If you're wondering how orchestras actually record film scores in sync with a movie (or play it live in concert), well, that's the Newman System, also devised by his dad. [David is an Oscar-nominated composer himself and his relatives include his sister Maria (a classical composer), his brother Thomas (an Oscar-nominated composer for a Lucci-like 14 times) and cousin Randy Newman (the recording artist and Oscar-winning composer himself). ]

Needless, to say, movie music is in his blood. And he as much as anyone understands the impact John Williams and his score for *Star Wars* had on Hollywood and popular music. Traditional film scores didn't exactly disappear in the 1970s, but they came damn close. Hollywood suddenly discovered they could grab an audience and trigger emotions just by slapping a pop song on the soundtrack. Sometimes, this was done brilliantly (*The Graduate*, *Easy Rider*, George Lucas's own *American Graffiti*). Sometimes it was done lazily. But with the studio system in tatters and pop songs such easy pickings, nobody wanted to keep full working orchestras on standby or composers on the payroll. Did they really need all those instruments? And what about one guy and a synthesizer? That sounded cool and hip and modern and it sure was a lot cheaper.

In walks John Williams. He had already made a mark on TV when Hollywood came calling. His versatility and strong melodies powered everything from disaster epics to the screen version of *Fiddler On The Roof* (where honestly, his first Oscar win was probably because voters probably didn't distinguish between the great Broadway songs and his actual score). Then he did *Jaws* and created a sensation; John Williams was becoming a household name. While he and Steven Spielberg spent two years working on the music for *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, the director recommend Williams to his friend George Lucas, who wanted a big, old-fashioned score for a space opera. Williams delivered.

The score for *Star Wars* became one of the best-selling instrumental albums of all time. (Only soundtracks with songs on them have ever sold better and precious few of those.) Suddenly, every director in Hollywood wanted a full orchestra and the lush, overwhelming sound only they can provide for their movies. A Moog synthesizer just wouldn't do. The score as birthed by Korngold, Steiner and others was back and would never go away again.

Watching *Star Wars* again (sadly, it was the Special Edition version, so Han Solo did not shoot first), you're reminded of the remarkable debt the film owes to the score. Great films are hard to imagine without their score, whether it's *Psycho* or *Lawrence of Arabia* or heck, even *The Big Chill* (not all pop soundtracks are bad). But *Star Wars* is almost impossible to imagine working half as well (or at all) with any other music. This performance only underlined that. It's such a

powerful score that they wisely screened the film with subtitles. It's impossible to modulate a live orchestra and allow the audience to hear the dialogue the way they would when simply watching the actual film.

Believe me, it didn't spoil the pleasure of the movie in the least to have a word or two lost as the New York Philharmonic tore into "Luke's Theme" or "Princess Leia's Theme" or a dozen other cues that have an almost Pavlovian kick for anyone who grew up with *Star Wars*. Indeed, the score is so expansive and all-consuming, you could have turned off the film soundtrack and just shown the visuals while the orchestra played. A scene or two — such as the final battle between Darth Vader and Obi-wan Kenobi — needed more from the sound mix and its menacing effects to give the extra jolt they deserve but even there the score was so good you barely noticed.

Mostly, however, you reveled in what Williams created. Its tunefulness and its embrace of the classic Hollywood use of themes for major characters (à la Wagner) is taken for granted today — but not by anyone who loves movie music and remembers how it was on its final legs. I assume the music is not technically complex, like perhaps some modernist composers. It's more "Rhapsody In Blue" — pure, unadulterated fun. However, the sheer marathon nature of the performance probably poses its own challenges (as does hearing yourself play as the audience drowns you out with cheers for the entrance of the villain).

Newman and the New York Philharmonic never flagged, undoubtedly lifted up by the high spirits of the crowd and their ecstatic appreciation. Mozart would have counted himself lucky to hear its like.

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