

THIS year Boston has been celebrating its 350th birthday, and from May through September the streets seemed always to be filled with smiling people out using and enjoying their city. Jubilee 350, as the celebration was called, included parades, exhibitions, new statues, tall ships, concerts, Boston Week, New England Month, and the Conference of Great Cities of the World. But no celebration or birthday present seemed to please Bostonians more than the appointment of the new conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, John Williams.

Under Williams' predecessor, the late Arthur Fiedler, the Boston Pops became the best-known orchestra in the world. Its radio broadcasts were carried around the globe, and on the RCA, London, and Deutsche Grammophon labels it sold fifty million records. The orchestra's television program, *Evening at Pops*, produced by WGBH in Boston, consistently ranks among the shows receiving highest ratings on the Public Broadcasting Service.

A flamboyant personality, Fiedler made his name a household word in the United States and Canada during the half-century that he conducted the Pops. When he died last year, the administrators of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, of which the Pops is a part, faced the monumental task of finding a replacement for him. Seiji Ozawa and Thomas Morris (the BSO's music director and general manager, respectively) passed up candidates with conventional backgrounds as bandleaders or classical conductors, and in a brilliant move that announced the end of the Fiedler era and the beginning of a new one they persuaded Williams, Hollywood's most successful and glamorous composer, to take the job.

The composer of scores for about sixty movies, including *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Dracula*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Williams is not abandoning the film centers of Hollywood and London. In press conferences in January he explained that he will simply do less film work so that he can spend three or four months a year in Boston. He reminded reporters that the Pops is actually the Boston Symphony minus only the twelve first-chair players, and said he could not pass up the opportunity to

work with a musical instrument of such high quality.

At recording sessions at Symphony Hall in Boston this summer Williams said to me, "Anybody coming here from the film industry, as I do, would have been a surprise. Frankly, it surprised me when Tom Morris proposed the idea. I had conducted my film music, but had never thought of making a career of conducting publicly. This situation is pregnant with possibilities, and I reacted first as a composer, thinking what a fantastic opportunity to present not only one's own music, but that of colleagues. Playing things that have just been written—while the ink is still wet—that's a great way to make music.

awards for records, and Academy Awards for his scores for *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Jaws*, and *Star Wars*.

Born in New York in 1932, Williams grew up in a musical environment. His father, a drummer, took the family to Los Angeles in the middle Forties and worked there as a free-lance percussionist in movie studios. John learned to read music and play the piano at home when he was six or seven and was always involved with music after that. After graduating from high school in North Hollywood, he went to UCLA and studied with a number of teachers in the Los Angeles area.

During the Korean War he served in the Air Force and worked in various bands, making arrangements and conducting. His military service completed, he enrolled at the Juilliard School in New York, where he studied with the famous teacher Rosina Lhevinne. "I think the best I ever played the piano," he says, "was the day I auditioned for

JOHN WILLIAMS and the BOSTON POPS

An American institution enters a new era

The proposition was irresistible, and I went headlong into it."

These were Williams' first recording sessions with this orchestra, the Pops' first sessions for the Philips label, and Philips' first digital recordings. George Korngold (son of the composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold) was the producer. Decca engineers had come from London, and Jules Bloomenthal, of Soundstream, Inc., had brought the digital equipment he was operating from Salt Lake City.

All were happy with the results they got for the first record, "Pops in Space," an album of selections from Williams' recent film scores which should be in stores by the time you read this. Euphoria reigned at Symphony Hall as work began on the second album, a collection of marches.

AHARD-WORKING, intelligent man with considerable low-key charm, Williams is well liked by the musicians. When I chatted with them at the breaks they spoke openly of their warm feelings for him and their respect for his musicality and his accomplishments. These include two Emmy awards for work in television, eight Grammy

her. I was very serious about the piano and worked hard at it for several years, but I don't think I ever believed I was extrovert enough or good enough to have a career as a pianist. And I was always lured by the orchestra. Even as a kid of fourteen or fifteen I made attempts at orchestration, arranging pop songs for a school band or musical shows in high school."

After Juilliard, Williams had a succession of musical jobs and toured for a while with Vic Damone as pianist and conductor before returning to Hollywood in the middle 1950s. There he married a singer, Barbara Ruick, and they had three children who are now in their twenties. She died in 1974.

"My first work in Hollywood was as a pianist in staff orchestras in the studios of Columbia Pictures and 20th Century-Fox," Williams says. "I was so lucky as a kid in those studios. I was not exactly adopted by older colleagues, but I was treated in such a friendly helpful way by many of them."

They included such famous men as Bernard Herrmann, Alfred and Lionel Newman, Dimitri Tiomkin, and André Previn. "André was actually about my own age, but he was more developed as a musician than I was. A close friend who has had a great effect on my life, he has always encouraged me and helped me in ways that sometimes

By William Livingstone

seemed small but led to big things."

Richard Dyer, music critic of the *Boston Globe* and a longtime Williams watcher, has pointed out that the films Williams has scored can be roughly classified in cycles. There was an early period of comedies such as *Gidget Goes to Rome* and *How to Steal a Million*. Next was a period of movie musicals, such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, followed by the disaster films of the late Sixties and Seventies: *Earthquake*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Towering Inferno*, and *Jaws*. Now in his space-epic period, Williams has agreed to do another sequel to *Star Wars*, due in 1983.

After mentioning Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Sergei Prokofiev, William Walton, and the few other great composers who have written film music, Williams says the history of the genre is disappointing. But he points out that it is, after all, just over fifty years old, and he is confident that film music will eventually occupy a higher place in the artistic hierarchy. "College cinema departments didn't exist in my student years, but every campus seems to have one now, and interest in film has become a passion. Whatever opera was to the nineteenth century, film is to the close of the twentieth. If we had a Wagner in this century, he would be a DeMille making his own pictures."

Among the difficulties in film composing, Williams mentions economics, which constantly shorten the post-production periods during which the composer works on the score. He also speaks of the frustration of having so much of the music covered by sound effects of wagon wheels or the breaking up of icebergs, and he complains of poor sound reproduction in movie theaters. "It all sounds wonderful on the dubbing stages where you hear a magnetic 70-millimeter print and six-track sound. But you wander into a neighborhood theater where one speaker is tilted and the one across the stage is unplugged, and there's dirt on the sound head, and you realize that the people are hearing about 5 per cent of what went into it." He's pleased that audiences are becoming more sophisticated about sound and says that seeing "Dolby Stereo" as a come-on on movie theater marquees is "very encouraging for a composer."

WILLIAMS says that to be a successful film composer "one has to develop a chameleon-like approach and be able to find a musical texture that will marry

with the whole general 'noise' that a picture will make. It's no good writing a post-serial, pointillistic piece for a popcorn romance where you need a tonal tune. If someone like Debussy with a very idiosyncratic, highly personal style were a film composer, only one film out of five hundred would suit his particular thumb print. For me, shifting styles wildly from one assignment to the next has been part of the challenge, and I've enjoyed that, not taking it too seriously. I don't claim that any of the stuff I write for movies is the *Eroica*, and I've had a lot of fun with it."

The lack of form and the inability to develop musical ideas are constricting elements in composing for films, he says. "Just as your tune is about to blossom, you have to cut to the heroine on a cliff and the musical idea is aborted. Because of the fragmentary nature of film music, many excellent germinal

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bits of musical energy—melodic phrases that beautiful movements could be built from—lie dormant and undeveloped in the scores. I've always urged such very talented colleagues as Alex North to take their music, put it in suite form, and develop it."

Williams was surprised by the success of his own suite of music from *Star Wars*, which had four hundred concert performances in the season of 1978-1979. He credits its vogue to Ernest Fleischman (manager of the L. A. Philharmonic) and Zubin Mehta, who first conducted it. "I told Zubin I couldn't understand it. I have no pretensions about that score, which I wrote for what I thought was a children's movie. All of us who worked on *Star Wars* thought it would be a great Saturday-morning show. We had no idea it was going to become a great world success."

Like film composers Richard Rodney Bennett, Jerry Goldsmith, Alex North, and Leonard Rosenman, Williams has composed a great deal of concert music in such standard forms as

the symphony and concerto. His first symphony was premiered in Houston in 1966 by André Previn, who also programmed it with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1972.

"My non-film music is atonal and has a more contemporary feeling, though by today's standards it's fairly conservative. It has tunes and uses the orchestra in a fairly conventional way, but it's more daring than what I can get away with in a film score, and I hope it's more idiosyncratic. For me it's a way of stretching myself and getting rid of certain impulses I couldn't get rid of in any other way. Some of it may have less value than music I've written commercially, but I think my violin concerto, which will be premiered by the St. Louis Symphony under Leonard Slatkin in January, is the best thing I've written. But I remember the old saying that a lot of things done in the name of art contain less art than those done in the name of commerce. I continue to try to do both, and I'm not any the less serious about one or the other."

Williams plans to compose some works especially for the Boston Pops. He will program music by many of his colleagues in the movie world, but will try to avoid overdoing the film connection. He will leave some of the classical repertoire that Fiedler played to Ozawa and others he thinks conduct it better. He expects to program more American works both because he thinks he should and because he knows them better and can perform them better.

He thinks the American tradition of light concert music is very healthy, and he is not in the least concerned by any danger of popularization leading to lowering of standards. "The Pops is a symphony orchestra, and it will not become a rock band, but popular music played by a symphony orchestra doesn't have to be trashy. It can always be done in a stellar way."

"When I was in Europe last winter I heard a concert by the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Lorin Maazel, a concert of Strauss waltzes and other light things. The musicians were smiling and having a good time, but there was also seriousness in their faces as they played with felicity, subtlety, and perfection of ensemble. There isn't an English word to express that attitude of combining seriousness and fun, though there may be one in German, but that's what I think the Pops should be. And that's what I'll strive for—everyone having a wonderful time and making an exemplary musical presentation."

He will maintain the three-part format that Fiedler used—a rousing overture and classical section, a concerto section, and a popular section. "There

is something very satisfying about that tripartite form." He finds it stimulating to be going back and learning clinically some of the light classical pieces he grew up with, and he enjoys playing for the very responsive Pops audience.

AT forty-eight, Williams seems to be starting a new life. His children are grown, and this summer he remarried. (His second wife, the former Samantha Winslow, is a photographer he met in Hollywood.) At the peak of his profession as a composer, he has added a new artistic dimension to his career by taking on a conspicuous conducting post. He has a two-year contract and says his relationship with the Pops will continue as long as he is happy in Boston and Boston is happy with him.

Boston is proud of being the Athens of America and of the role it has played in the nation's history. A slogan on

tourist pamphlets this summer read, "America, Your Mother Wants You to Come Home for Her Birthday." But while celebrating the past, the city looks cleaned up and ready for another great three and a half centuries.

Bostonians have many affectionate memories of Arthur Fiedler, but Williams fits perfectly the image of Boston as an up-to-date, forward-looking city, and the city has taken him to its heart. In his first week there he was asked to speak to the Harvard Club, and the Berklee College of Music has given him an honorary doctorate.

In one short season Williams has won over the orchestra, the audience, and the critics. In writing of Williams on *Evening at Pops*, the *Globe's* TV critic William A. Henry III said "His contributions to the eight new shows . . . are as styled as the norm of the Fiedler era." Richard Dyer has repeatedly

stated his satisfaction with Williams in the three major facets of his job—as a program builder, as a conductor on the podium, and as a public personality.

PERHAPS the most telling comments, ones that augur well for a long relationship between Williams and the Pops, were made by Harry Ellis Dickson, who was Fiedler's assistant for many years and was one of the candidates to replace him. In an interview with Dyer, Dickson said in part: "Williams has a good classical background as well as in jazz, and he's a fine conductor with a capacity for growth. I would even say he's a better conductor now than he was a month ago. On top of that he is warm and sensitive, a person of great decency and very modest. I don't know that I've ever met a more humble conductor. Getting him here was absolutely marvelous, almost a stroke of genius." □

High-brow (Digital) Popcorn

An international undertaking: American orchestra and conductor, Dutch record company, and English recording team. With John Williams (standing, center) are the Men from Decca—Stan Goodall, Peter Cook, and Jack Law.



Ira Wyman

CHOOSING John Williams as Arthur Fiedler's successor at the helm of the Boston Pops was a real public-relations master stroke. The popularity of his movie music notwithstanding, the man simply *looks* like a classical musician in an old Hollywood film, the kind of guy who might have taught Cornel Wilde how to play the piano or coached Jeanette MacDonald through some tricky tessitura. He's a "longhair" in the old-fashioned sense of the word, even though he's not above sharing his podium with an intelligent fire hydrant.

Williams' just-released "Pops in Space" album represents several firsts: the Pops' debut on Philips, Philips' (and the Pops') first digital recording, and, of course, the *Star Wars* Maestro's first recorded effort with his new orchestra. It's an auspicious occasion, and I am happy to be able to report that it is a lot of fun as well.

One might quibble about the repertoire, but really, what else could we have expected? A medley of Sex Pistols tunes arranged by Morton Gould? No, despite the seeming overfamiliarity of this music, it's rather nice to have what might logically have been billed as "John Williams' Greatest Hits" collected on a sin-

gle LP, especially as these are *definitive* performances. And as properly derivative as Williams' movie work is, drawing as it does from sources as varied as Tchaikovsky, Liszt, the early serialists, and just about every composer ever employed at MGM or Warner Bros. (does that make it Neo-Classical? Post-Modernist?), there's no denying that it's also smart, effective, tuneful stuff—exactly the kind of high-brow popcorn that has long been the Pops' stock in trade.

Everything (and I mean everything) you'd want is here: all the big tunes from the two *Star Wars* movies and *Superman* (mercifully bereft of Leslie Bricusse's dopey lyrics for the love theme), even the new stuff Williams added to the revised version of *Close Encounters*. For my money, there's just enough music here to keep you interested without the special visual effects. The orchestra, rising to the occasion, plays all of it as seriously as if it were the *Eroica*, and conductor Williams leads this umpteenth go-around of composer Williams' scores with the freshness and enthusiasm of his first. The digital sound is spectacular, and, not surprisingly, it is most impressive at the quieter end of the dynamic range. Check out, particularly, the *very*

low-level chatter of the string entrance on the Princess Leia theme: you simply haven't ever heard anything so quiet on an analog recording, perhaps not even in the concert hall.

ALL in all, "Pops in Space" gets the Boston institution's new era off to a rousingly good-humored intergalactic start. And, fittingly enough, the whole thing was produced by George Korngold, son of Erich Wolfgang ditto, without whose example, inspiration, *et cetera* Mr. Williams might never have concocted the music that will probably make him the richest orchestral composer in the world. Perhaps Mr. Williams might return the favor some time in the future: a Williams/Itzhak Perlman version of the Korngold Violin Concerto, anyone? —Steve Simels

JOHN WILLIAMS: *Pops in Space*. *Superman: March; Love Theme. The Empire Strikes Back: The Asteroid Field; Yoda's Theme; The Imperial March. Star Wars: Main Theme; Princess Leia. Close Encounters of the Third Kind: Suite.* Boston Pops, John Williams cond. PHILIPS ● 9500 921 \$9.98, © 7300 921 \$9.98.