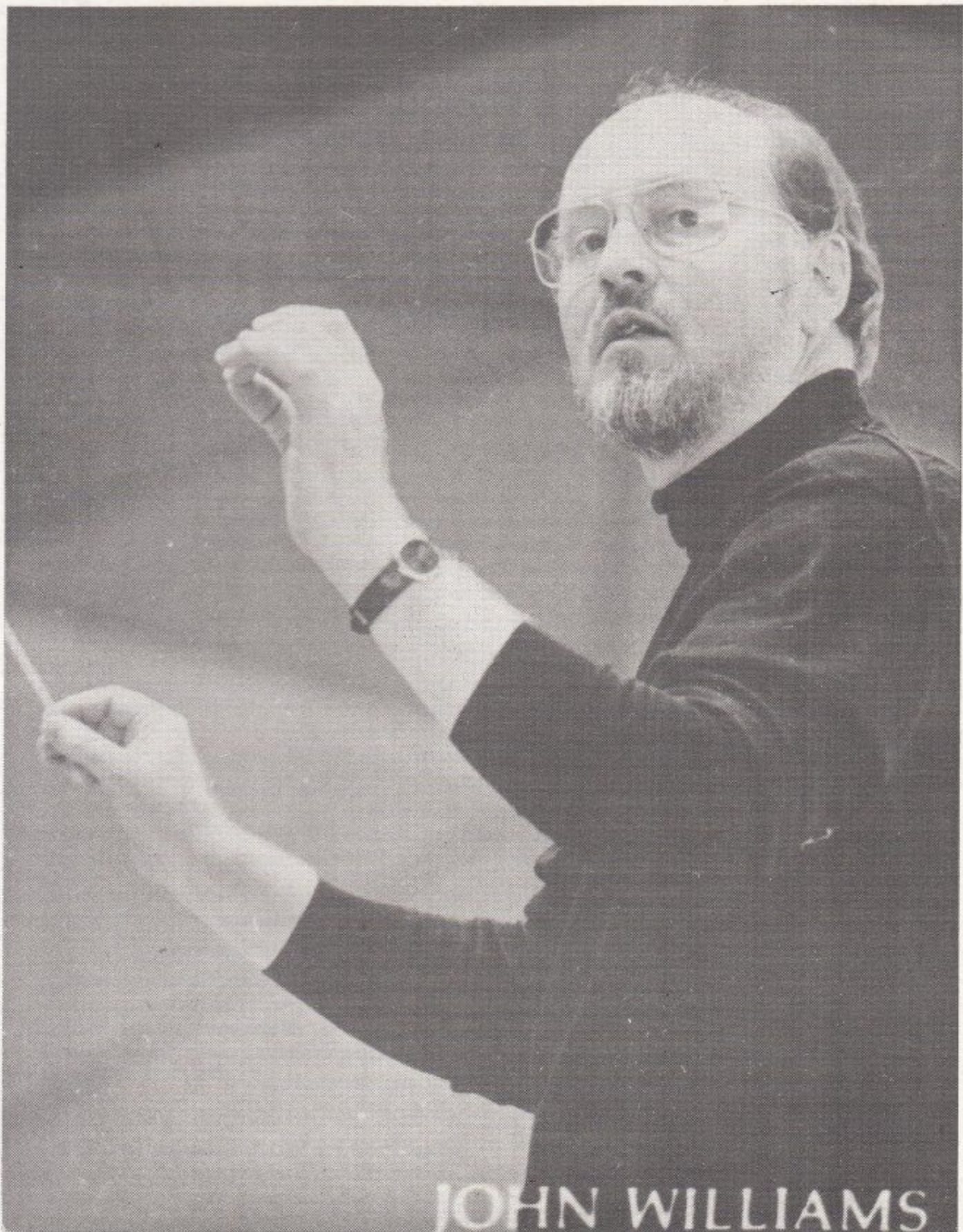


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# SOUNDTRACK!

THE COLLECTOR'S QUARTERLY



JOHN WILLIAMS



# KEEPING IN TOUCH

## WITH JOHN WILLIAMS

by John Caps

The crowd noise around John Williams has gotten so deafening these days thanks to the cult-status of his science-fiction music scores and the television exposure of his Boston Pops concerts that he must be experiencing a very real sense of vertigo. Even I have to blink to get a firm focus on the early days of his rise. In that effort recently, I looked over some of the correspondence that has passed between us over the past five years -- always endlessly courteous and faintly formal on his part, always a little pushy and overly enthusiastic on my part. In any case, reading some of his comments about his own work may help bring the craftsman-behind-the-commotion back into focus.

His correspondence here stretches from May 1975 to August 1980 and from his old Loring Avenue home on one coast to his office at Boston's Symphony Hall on the other where the crowd quells for a few minutes, anyway.

JOHN WILLIAMS: Sometime in the future, I hope we'll be able to meet personally but as you know I've been abroad for a few months and have only now begun to find the time to deal with a few pleasant chores such as answering your letter. In lieu of a tape recorder, let me try to answer some of your questions as best I can in letter form. You spoke on the phone of your wish that more original scores could be transferred in careful suites to the concert halls and I, of course, share that wish. The problems I'm sure you already know about. I'm sure I don't have to remind you but it might pay to just bring them up briefly. The first problem is copying as you know. These orchestral parts to all the films -- for example JAWS -- there might be thirty or forty minutes of performable music there but you can't get the music out of the library. I've tried before and one would have to repay the copyists which would make the whole thing prohibitive. There is a published suite of the JAWS music which is published by MCA which an orchestra could even buy. I think it costs eight dollars but it is a simplification, it's almost like a school orchestration if you know what I mean. So for an orchestra of the kind you mentioned, that is not going to be good enough.

JOHN CAPS: Where are the score parts for, say, the album performances of any given film?

JOHN WILLIAMS: The scores and album parts are all at Universal studios with the film parts and impossible to get, because they're very, very guarded. I did a Filmharmonic concert in London and I had to get written permission from the Union to borrow one cue. So it makes it very difficult to get film music outside of its own little world. / The STAR WARS suites that exist were actually reconstructed at great cost from the film parts because the composer was interested in tapping the concert market and investors decided it would be worth it. But that is a rare case. -- J.C. / Some of the other composers, John, may have arranged their music into suites that would be published. For one thing, I know that Bernard Herrmann had some. Novello publishes some of his music in suite form.



JOHN CAPS: Who owns the rights to the music you conducted in London, then?

JOHN WILLIAMS: All of that music came out of the libraries again. I did THE COWBOYS and THE REIVERS and some JANE EYRE, and of course the disaster pictures, but again I had to get written permission from the Union and the music was sent from the studio to be returned to them by the British charity involved. So this is the kind of problem that you're up against here. Only because it was a concert for one night only and it was for charity, did the Union demand no repayment for the copyist. I sound a little pessimistic and negative with you, John, but I don't know what else to tell you. I could take some time and rearrange all that music and organize the copying of parts but I don't live a public life in the sense that I need those things. [ Interesting that this excerpt from 1976 shows no inkling or desire to "be a conductor". Williams was once the most private of film composers. -- J.C. ] I don't concertize, it's just not part of what I do professionally, whereas Mancini and Elmer Bernstein and Michel Legrand and some of these other chaps do that as a way of earning money. You spoke of my IMAGES score as being almost an extension of my "Essay for Strings" and I have often thought that I might make a second "Essay" out of the material used in IMAGES. But again, only if and when a) I can find time to put it into concert suite form and b) a budget can be produced for the copying of orchestral parts, etc.

JOHN CAPS: You seem to spend so much time and care on your string writing particularly. Can you talk about that?

JOHN WILLIAMS: I think, in my mind, strings make the purest music. Strings vibrating on a violin, or a vocal chord vibrating. I don't play a stringed instrument but I love them and I suppose this would explain whatever affinity I may have for them. I do play chamber music with violonist and cellist friends whenever possible.

JOHN CAPS: Strings are used to really recreate the motions of the sea in the music to POSEIDON ADVENTURE in a very original way. There are modulations, though, particularly the one the clarinet introduces in the end title music which mimic Ralph Vaughan-Williams and his ANTARCTIC score.

JOHN WILLIAMS: As far as any connection between my POSEIDON and Vaughan-Williams' ANTARCTICA is concerned, I would say two things. First, my admiration and affinity for the music of Vaughan-Williams is great. Fortunately, disasters have a universal significance in that all human-kind is subject to their effects and, therefore, the subject of a disaster is in that sense larger than melodrama. THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE and ANTARCTICA also share in common the vastness of the sea, tidal waves, continental ice cracks, etc. This connection that you make between the two Williams' flatters me greatly.

JOHN CAPS: I'm interested how you got into television writing originally. Is there a story back there during your days as a studio pianist? Did they, for instance, when you came to write for CHECKMATE, expect a PETER GUNN-type score from you because you had played piano for Henry Mancini on that show?

JOHN WILLIAMS: As far as the origins of my assignments to do the CHECKMATE tv shows are concerned, they can be traced to a man named Stanley Wilson who was at that time Musical Director of Revue Productions, which had produced a television show called M SQUAD for which Wilson asked



me to compose not a PETER GUNN-type score but, more generally, a jazz-type background. Having done a few M SQUAD assignments for Wilson, he then assigned me to the CHECKMATE show which came a year later -- 1959, I think. I have had some jazz experience, mostly in the '50s and mostly with members of the then West Coast Jazz School. I have been associated with Shelly Manne on quite a few LPs, both as pianist and as arranger.

JOHN CAPS: Then you went into many of the light comedy films of the '60s because they found they wanted that melodic sort of hip sound. Many of those like JOHN GOLDFARB PLEASE COME HOME were real dogs, yet I'm amazed at your ability to come up with something inspired for each (well, almost every) one of them. How does one write well for a film that you know is bad? What comedy scores do you admire?

JOHN WILLIAMS: Your questions about the light comedies in the '60s that I did, have to do with a composer's ability to do his best writing for a bad film. I think it can be said that one always tries to do his best work, whatever the assignment, and the young composer's hope is always that better things lie ahead. These same comments could apply to VALLEY OF THE DOLLS which you mentioned once, except that I think there were some very nice things in André Previn's part of that score. As far as comedy scores that I admire, I remember one in particular that I worked on years ago as a pianist for a man whom I admired very much in those days, Adolph Deutsch, and the picture was SOME LIKE IT HOT. Deutsch always used to say that the music shouldn't try too hard to be funny itself, otherwise one would have something on the level of "Tom and Jerry". I think I believe this. I think music is very rarely funny in and of itself. If a scene in a movie is funny, I would almost prefer to leave it unscored unless, of course, it is some kind of slapstick or burlesque where music can provide, it a balletic sense, tempo.

JOHN CAPS: We have talked about developmental continuity in a film score and what the composer "hooks onto" within each picture that will become the sort of point-of-view of his score. Examples like HEIDI are obvious, where you scored the Alpine setting rather than the Children's story, but what about THE REIVERS where inspiration seems to come from all directions at once? And how did the directors add to your choice of concept? JANE EYRE is another one.

JOHN WILLIAMS: I'm glad you like the HEIDI and JANE EYRE scores and I have been thinking of putting them in suite form for some time. [ The music from JANE EYRE now exists in performable concert-suite form. -- J.C. ] I think I would have to agree that the HEIDI score has less to do with the actual story of the little girl than it does the magnificence of the Alps and the wonderful Swiss setting in which the story takes place, as well as the period suggested by the story and book. With regard to the inspiration one may detect in THE REIVERS score, I think it must have had to do with the film itself since I work to a final print and not a story board. The fact that the little boy in the movie looked exactly like my youngest son at the time of the creation of the picture may have had something to do with the affinity I felt for the film. It never occurred to me to write down or up to the film. I find all of Mark Rydell's pictures especially musical and, since Rydell himself is something of an amateur musician, the question as to what kind of music was arrived at mutually. Rydell and I have always collaborated very comfortably. The banjo parts, by the way, were both composed and improvised -- about 50% each since the banjo player was not an expert reader. Your overall question about directors is a difficult one to answer because while it is enjoyable and productive for me often to work closely with some of them, by the same token I feel that I can do better when left alone by some of the others. This is just purely an individual thing and depends on the



person and the project. As far as what you call "Developmental Continuity" in film scores is concerned, I think this concept does exist, but only with a few of the very best composers, in my mind. I always think of Jerry Goldsmith as one of the best composers presently working in the film medium. And also [the late] Bernard Herrmann.

JOHN CAPS: Mark Rydell also did CINDERELLA LIBERTY with you. Was its theme composed with Toots Thielemans' harmonica sound in mind? Did you have that, going in?

JOHN WILLIAMS: The CINDERELLA LIBERTY theme was composed first and then, looking at the theme, it was decided that it was perfect material for an artist like Toots Thielemans to play. I suggested this to Mark Rydell. We then called Toots to California and played the theme for him and arrangements were made to engage him to play in the soundtrack of the picture.

JOHN CAPS: You mentioned working to final prints of films. But what about your various chores as Music Supervisor on movie musicals like FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GOODBYE MR. CHIPS, or TOM SAWYER. The job is almost that of a composer, but not quite. The weaker the song material, the more you are called on to do. I'm thinking of the Sherman Brothers songs here.

JOHN WILLIAMS: As for my assignment arranging and orchestrating the Sherman Brothers score TOM SAWYER, I have to say that I was certainly facing composer problems and, in fairness to the Sherman Brothers, it must be said that when one is doing arranging and adaptation for a film on the scale of TOM SAWYER, the arranger per se is constantly functioning on the level of composer. As far as writing from scratch from a vocal line is concerned, in the case of TOM SAWYER I not only had lead sheets of the Sherman Brothers songs, but also beautiful art work story boards of each number, which were provided by the late producer, Arthur Jacobs. These story boards made the requirements of the orchestration quite specific and were a great help. Relative to GOODBYE MR. CHIPS, you once asked about the piano lines in that -- the particular figure in "Where Did My Childhood Go". The piano arrangement in that, too, was made by me. I am always an orchestral writer first and a composer who writes songs when asked to. Orchestrating other people's songs, though, helps refine your own melody-writing skills.

JOHN CAPS: Back to JAWS. It has very definitely two kinds of music, two separate directions in its music. The sort of Stravinskian parts which are usually underwater and the swashbuckling fugual-like material that I associate with the chase on the surface. Is this fair?

JOHN WILLIAMS: To differentiate between what you call the Stravinskian passages and the swashbuckling fugue, I would say that the former passages have to do with the attack of the shark specifically, while the fugue subject, if you examine the film carefully, has to do with the assembly of hardware with which to fight the shark, i.e., the assembly of the cage and demonstrations of Hooper's advanced shark hunting equipment, etc.

JOHN CAPS: Your experience with the London Symphony certainly figured in your being offered the job in Boston, but what did the composer in you feel about accepting the position? What are the dangers?

JOHN WILLIAMS: The danger is in trying to replace Arthur Fiedler. Certainly he was irreplaceable but we've got to start something new while keeping up the best of the tradition. There's a lot of new music waiting to



be played down in the vaults at Symphony Hall. There is some good film music we can do. Certainly part of my thinking as a composer has been to write some new pieces just for the Pops and encourage other people to do the same. It's a new era for them and for me.