



John Williams

For a generation of movie-goers, the work of composer John Williams defines the sound of the modern Hollywood blockbuster. Nick Shave talks to the man behind the music for *Jaws* and the *Star Wars* trilogy

I'm usually up at about eight o'clock in the morning and do most of my work at California's Universal film studios. I live with my wife in west Los Angeles, a 20-minute drive from Universal. I don't have time to listen to music in the morning, that's when I do my telephone business to Boston and New York.

I never planned to be a film composer. I always wanted to be an instrumentalist and began playing the piano when I was seven. As a child growing up on Long Island in New York, all the adults I knew were musicians. Before I knew it I was studying music and being directed towards good teachers by my father, a member of the CBS Radio Orchestra in the 1930s.

I always loved 20th-century music. At a very early age I was tuned in to Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Prokofiev. As well as the Russian School I've always liked British music, especially William Walton. Americans and jazz musicians are attracted to Walton because he has that rhythmic flair and distinctive English sound of the 1920s.

And then there's jazz, which both myself and my father played when I was in my early teens. My jazz heroes were pianist Art Tatum and Teddy Wilson, who were in their high form in those years. I couldn't go to the nightclubs because of liquor restrictions so we used

to catch them in the cinemas in New York where they played a 30-minute programme before the film began.

These days I listen to very little music. I compose so much, I'm busy all the time which means that listening to music is not particularly pleasurable. I'm constantly trying to work out themes and develop ideas in my mind, so whether the music is wonderfully good or badly written it's always a distraction.

The only time I really listen to CDs and records is when I'm researching a score. I'm working on a film called *Amistad* with Steven Spielberg and Anthony Hopkins which concerns a slave rebellion in 19th-century America. So I'm listening to American street band music to get an accurate representation of the military bands of the period.

Even when I leave the studios in the evening I find it impossible to switch off. When I join friends for dinner I can't have music in the background. In the middle of the conversation I'll hear it and say, "Well, that's in the key of D and that F sharp is a little bit flat." Most people can let music wash over them like a pleasure bath whereas a musician, at least my kind of musician, listens to it in an intellectually aware state.

I do, however, enjoy going to concerts a great deal. Among my favourites are British composers Michael Tippett and Peter Maxwell Davies and film composer Jerry Goldsmith. I usually go to the Boston Symphony concerts because I've been a long-time conductor of the Pops there and have conducted the Symphony from time to time. The Boston Symphony is the centre of my life there, socially and musically.

Writing for films can be so inhibiting. Some of the best scores I've done have been in collaboration with Steven Spielberg – *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, for example. *Star Wars* offered me the greatest orchestral scope as a composer and achieved the most surprising success. The score had to be heroic, swashbuckling, almost operatic. It had to have almost Wagnerian proportions in order to match the epic scope that Lucas was trying to create. As far as orchestration went, the sky was the limit. Where else can you write 12 brass fanfares in one film, have them heard, and still get away with it?

At the end of the day it's not only film scores which are on my mind. I recently conducted my bassoon concerto, *Five Sacred Trees*, with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and I'm currently collaborating with Rita Dove, poet laureate of the US, on a song-cycle. Even though I can write my concert pieces at home I still prefer to go to Universal, where there's very little disturbance. Being a composer means you live a musical working life, but it's a very quiet one. ■

• The CD of *Five Sacred Trees* is released on Sony Classical (SK 62729) this month.

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