

JOHN WILLIAMS

Multi-faceted movie great

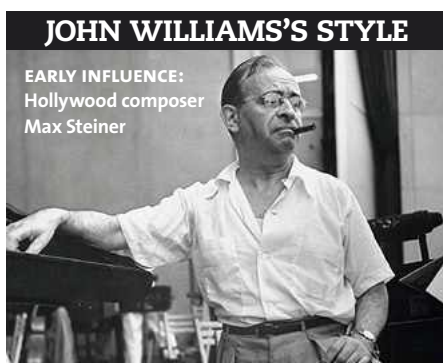
A rare combination of creative imagination, wide-ranging knowledge and sheer adaptability has made John Williams the most successful film composer of all time, says **John Riley**

Film music often has to make its points immediately, and two of John Williams's best-loved scores feature, respectively, unforgettable five- and two-note themes. But, for all the instant recognisability of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Jaws*, there's a lot more to Williams than just that. With hundreds of films and television episodes written over more than half a century, there's little that he hasn't tackled in terms of style, genre or tone of voice.

Some of cinema's most successful franchises, including *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Superman* and *Harry Potter*, are inconceivable without his music. But outside these fantasy scores, he is equally adept at dramas and even comedies, and some of his non-film works have an avant-gardism that can seem surprising. He is, however, at his best in sweeping, unbuttoned Americana that has an immediacy and confidence filled with easy melody.

When he picked up the Oscar for *Schindler's List* in 1994, it was his fifth statuette, following successes for his arrangements in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), and the original scores for *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977) and *ET* (1982). To date he has been nominated almost 50 times (second only to Walt Disney) and has won a host of other awards including over 20 Grammys – in many years two of his scores have even competed against each other.

His body of film work is impressive enough, but he has also written a large amount of concert music, including 15 concertos and a symphony, written with the encouragement of Bernard Herrmann and premiered by his long-standing advocate André Previn: all three men moved between the film studio and the concert hall. His bassoon concerto, *Five Sacred Trees*, escapes the instrument's clownish persona with something grittier than the benign sounds of some of his most popular



JOHN WILLIAMS'S STYLE

EARLY INFLUENCE:
Hollywood composer
Max Steiner

Americana

The Reivers (1969) and *The Sugarland Express* (1974) use instruments like the banjo, harmonica and Jew's harp, and include hoedowns and other popular dance forms. These are set against Copland-esque evocations of wide American landscapes.

Classic film scores

Williams started out at the end of the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood film music, with revered composers such as Alfred Newman, Max Steiner and Dimitri Tiomkin. Though the 1960s would see the rise of pop-song scores, Williams kept faith with the orchestra and in 1977 *Star Wars* helped re-establish it, paving the way for many of today's film composers.

Melodies and themes

While he writes fantastic melodies, much of Williams's work employs *leitmotifs*, smaller cells associated with characters or ideas that are manipulated and developed over the film, in a way akin to Wagner's operas.

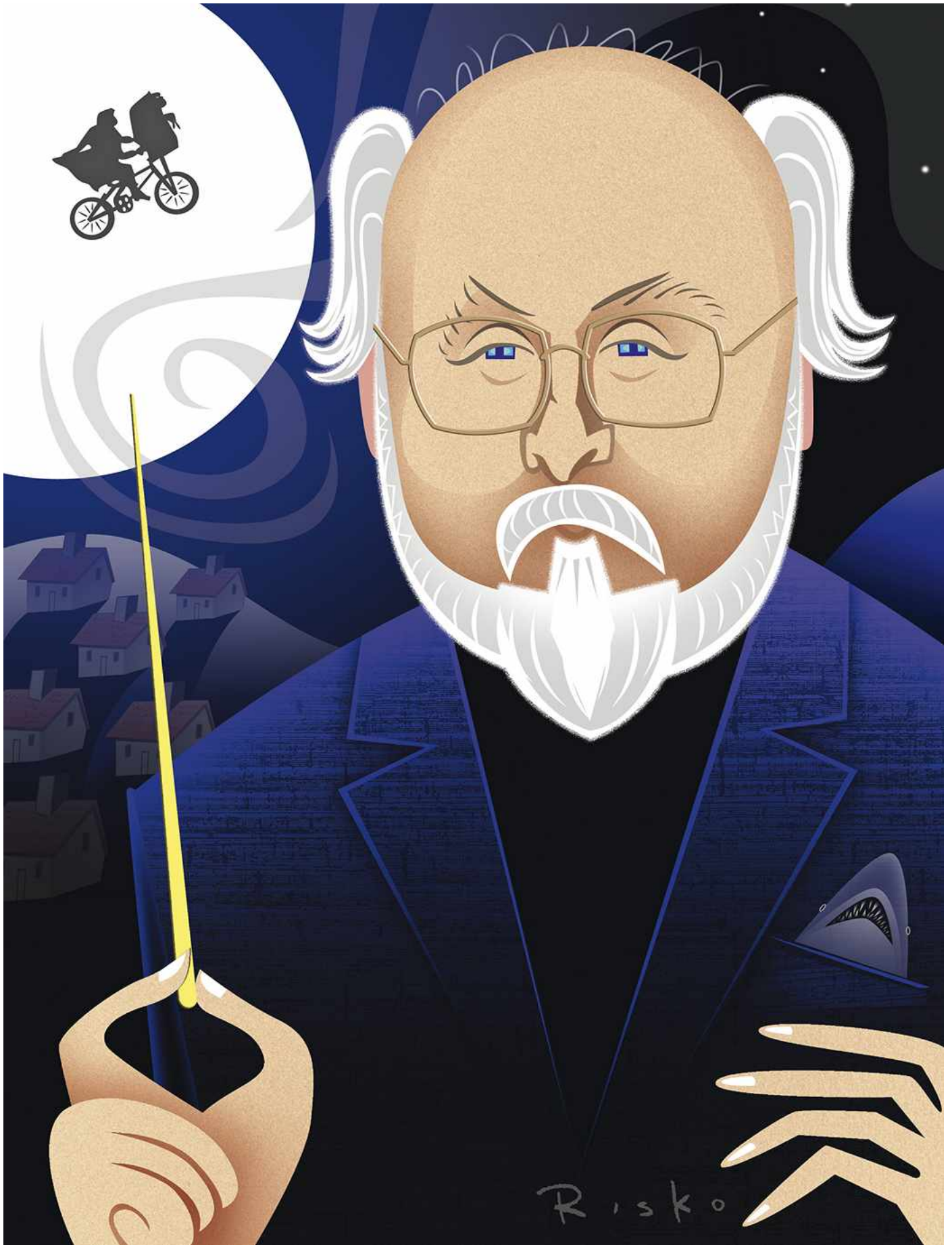
Avant-garde

While his fantasy and popular scores are filled with rich melodies, he is interested in the avant-garde. His rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and orchestral effects and occasional electronics add an edge to some scores, pulling them back from sentimentality.

film work. But he does not see the concert hall as allowing the freedom that the studio denies. Indeed, the money that comes from a major studio can allow some extraordinary sonic experimentation. 'Film music,' he has observed, 'can also bring out the best in us, if we give it the best of us and don't approach it like a musical step-child.' 'Classical' performers who have happily taken up Williams's work include conductors Leonard Slatkin, Seiji Ozawa, Christoph von Dohnányi and Kurt Masur, soprano Kathleen Battle, violinists Itzhak Perlman and Gil Shaham, cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Lynn Harrell, and the Chicago Symphony's principal horn Dale Clevenger, while for many years Williams himself has conducted the Boston Pops Orchestra.

His numerous, often patriotic, occasional pieces include Olympic fanfares and celebrations of Columbus's arrival in America, the Statue of Liberty, Texas's declaration of independence, the New York Philharmonic's 150th anniversary, Leonard Bernstein's 70th birthday and Prince Philip's trip to Boston. For Barack Obama's first inauguration, he wrote a set of variations on *Simple Gifts*, famously used by Copland in *Appalachian Spring*.

Johnny Williams Snr was a jazz percussionist and his son not only took his name (some of his closest collaborators still call him Johnny), but also followed him into the film studio as a pianist. As well as working for film greats such as Alfred Newman and Max Steiner, his piano playing appeared in dozens of films such as *Porgy and Bess*, *Some Like It Hot*, *West Side Story* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This mixture of influences – jazz and popular music, the core classical repertoire and the great symphonic film scores – helped formulate Williams's style. He even hammered out the opening riff of Henry Mancini's theme for TV's popular private eye *Peter Gunn* (1958-61). Meanwhile ▶



LIFE & TIMES

A quick guide to the main events in the life of John Williams

THE LIFE

1932

THE TIMES



1932

John Towner Williams Jr is born on 8 February in **QUEENS, NEW YORK**. The son of a jazz percussionist, he becomes a pianist and leads his own jazz band.

1952

After studying at the University of California, he is drafted into the US Air Force where he conducts for the first time. He enters the Juilliard School and works as a jazz pianist in New York.

1956

In Hollywood he makes a name as an arranger and composer, and he records with **ANDRÉ PREVIN**.

1974

He works with director Steven Spielberg on *The Sugarland Express*, followed by *Jaws* (1975).

1977

Spielberg introduces Williams to director George Lucas. *Star Wars* becomes the best-selling score-only soundtrack of all time.

1980

Williams replaces Arthur Fiedler as principal conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, and stays in the position for 13 years.

1994

He enjoys double success with scores to *Jurassic Park* and **SCHINDLER'S LIST**, the latter of which wins him his fifth Oscar.

2005

He scores *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Less prolific as a film composer, he continues to conduct many orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic.

2013

1932

New York Governor **FRANKLIN D ROOSEVELT** defeats Republican Herbert Hoover to become the 32nd President of the United States in a landslide victory. Uniquely, he goes on to serve four terms.



1941

The Japanese launch a surprise air attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, ending the US's policy of isolationism and bringing it into World War II.

1955

Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man while riding on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott and what is considered by many as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

1969

Depicting the seedier side of New York, **MIDNIGHT COWBOY**, directed by John Schlesinger and starring Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffmann, wins the Oscar for Best Picture.

1984

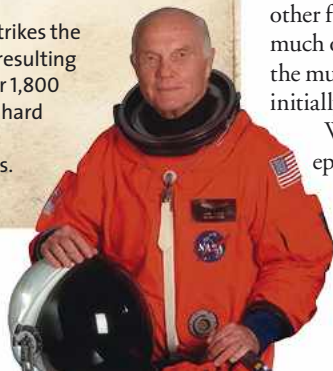
At the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, Carl Lewis equals Jesse Owens's record of four gold medals, in the 100m, 200m, long jump and 4 x 100m relay.

1998

Thirty-six years after becoming the first American to orbit the Earth, **JOHN GLENN** becomes the oldest man to go into space when, aged 77, he goes on a mission on the space shuttle Discovery.

2005

Hurricane Katrina strikes the southern US coast, resulting in the deaths of over 1,800 people. Particularly hard hit is New Orleans, where the levee fails.



he led his own jazz ensemble, and his score for the comedy heist *How to Steal a Million* (1966) captures the balance of tension and levity. More traditional was the music for a 1970 US TV *Jane Eyre*, where Williams had a chance to visit the Brontës' home in preparation for writing a mini piano concerto in English pastoral style.

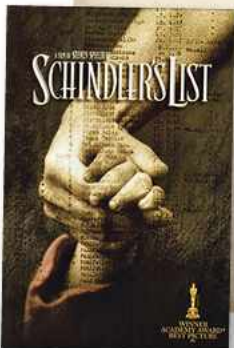
In 1974 Williams met a slightly awkward young man who was about to direct his first feature. Directors are not always musically literate, but Steven Spielberg's knowledge of Williams's catalogue so impressed the composer that he agreed to score his heist-chase *The Sugarland Express*. Thus began his most important cinematic collaboration during which he has scored all of Spielberg's films except *The Color Purple*. Williams placed *The Sugarland Express* geographically, using bluegrass, adding a folk guitar and harmonica theme (Belgian jazz great Toots Thielemans obliged), which also appears in versions for string orchestra, and a cool, slightly dirty jazz ensemble.

The next year, their collaboration moved to another level. *Jaws*'s two-note motif has become as iconic as Bernard Herrmann's music for *Psycho*'s shower scene. Starting *pianissimo*, it draws us into the screen and the ocean's depths before it races terrifyingly forward to attack. But ironically, in the 1960s and '70s, the jazz and pop influences that Williams had helped introduce were beginning to overwhelm traditional orchestral film scores, especially as pop-filled 'soundtrack' albums became a useful source of income. It was left to Williams to push back.

Spielberg suggested to his friend George Lucas that Williams should score his low-budget film *Star Wars*. Little was expected of the film, but rather than cut the music budget, Williams and Lucas chose to go for a full orchestral Romantic score in the tradition of Korngold's music for Errol Flynn swashbucklers – it was entirely fitting for a film inspired by 1930s serials like *Flash Gordon*. He recorded the score with the London Symphony Orchestra, beginning a regular collaboration, embracing *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Superman* and *Harry Potter*.

But *Star Wars* was a difficult production: many thought this 'children's fantasy' would disappear quickly and Williams expected it to be no more notable in his catalogue than any other film. Even Lucas was disappointed with much of the finished film, but he later said the music was one of the few things that had initially exceeded his expectations.

Williams had scored a number of episodes of TV's *Lost in Space*, and for *Star Wars* he created a space opera with Wagnerian *leitmotifs* and big





80TH BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE:
John Williams (third left) with (l-r)
Leonard Slatkin, Jessye Norman,
Steven Spielberg, Yo-Yo Ma and
Keith Lockhart at Tanglewood in 2012

set-pieces. He didn't know that Lucas was planning a series of films but this approach proved perfect as he was able to develop that basic material to bind together what became six films and track the progress of the narrative and the characters. The popularity of the film and its music changed the face of film music, reintroducing the idea of the orchestral score and allowing other composers to argue their cause.

Today, Williams works in a unique fashion. To avoid pre-visualising the film or anticipating the tempo of scenes, he doesn't read scripts or source materials. But he does sometimes write initial general cues based on what he does know; in 1977 Spielberg used those to help structure the alien adventure film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. For the crucial five-note communication motif, Williams wrote around 350 combinations. The octave drop and final fifth (intervals that pervade the score) seem timeless, while that last interval, rather than an end, is like an ellipsis, full of potential.

For *Indiana Jones* he again wrote a number of potential main themes, but although they were winnowed down to two candidates, Spielberg was unable to choose, so Williams bound them together in his music. In this massive score – it runs almost continuously through the film – Williams again showed his mastery of tone. The Nazis' music is aggressive in a traditional 1940s style but slightly camp, in keeping with the comedy-fantasy tone, yet it never reduces the threat too far by becoming comic. And it is apt to suddenly change, with the music playing a crucial role: at the end it embraces the beautiful spirits emerging from the Ark before their horrifying transition.

Perhaps Williams's early prolific work on

an ever-changing rota of projects helped him to employ various styles in different films at the same time – in the early 1970s some of his great successes were disaster movies such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *Towering Inferno* (1974). Yet at the same time as writing these dense, exciting and melodic orchestral scores he worked on *Images*, Robert Altman's drama about mental breakdown – the stripped-down textures include a sweet Spanish guitar and a glockenspiel, with strange crashes

For *Star Wars* he created a space opera with Wagnerian leitmotifs

from Japanese percussionist Stomu Yamashta. Thirty years later Williams introduced a whole range of Japanese instruments, including the 13-stringed *koto* and the *shakuhachi* flute, into *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). Counterpointing these are Yo-Yo Ma's solo cello, giving the heroine her voice, while the president is portrayed by Itzhak Perlman's tender violin.

Similarly, in 1993 Spielberg and Williams simultaneously worked on two dizzyingly different projects, somehow keeping them separate. For the dinosaur-cloning fantasy *Jurassic Park*, Williams wrote a wonderfully optimistic, striding main theme, which is overtaken by the darker, more violent music as things go predictably wrong. At the same time they were making the film that would overturn Spielberg's reputation as popcorn merchant: the Holocaust drama *Schindler's List*. For this, Williams studied Russian Jewish *shetl* music, writing a violin concertino (played by Itzhak Perlman) that was understatedly

melancholic, drawing us into the film by leaving us to contemplate the horror. *Schindler's List* opened the way for Spielberg's more serious work for which Williams wrote darker, more contemplative scores, notably in the turbid morality of *Munich* (2005) and the Coplandesque *Lincoln* (2012). His dissonant music helps the viewer navigate the complex of flashbacks and forwards in Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995).

At 80, Williams is slowing down to 'only' around one film a year. Those popular franchises – with their immense scores – continue, and he is slated to score upcoming *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* films. But it's equally possible that he'll work, barely announced, on a smaller scale project like the wartime family drama *The Book Thief*, whose music he has just completed. Whatever comes next, his legacy – whether it's the two notes of *Jaws*, the five notes of *Close Encounters* or much beyond – is assured. ■

BBC
RADIO



Composer of the Week is broadcast at 12pm, Mon to Fri, repeated at 6.30pm

2-6 December *Mascagni*

9-13 December *Composers of Iceland*

16-20 December *Louise Farrenc*

23-27 December *Beethoven*

30-31 December *Sammartini*

JOHN WILLIAMS

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS



Star Wars

LSO/John Williams
Sony S2K92950 (2 discs) £12.99
Williams leads the LSO in the best-selling film score album ever, in classic 'Golden Age of Hollywood' style.



Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Arista 07822 19004-2
(Download at iTunes.com)
One of Williams's favourites, as well as the famous five-note motif, there are Ligeti-esque clouds of sound.



Memoirs of a Geisha

Yo-Yo Ma (cello) etc
/John Williams
Sony 82876 77857 2
(See prestoclassical.co.uk)
An understated character study featuring a range of Japanese instruments.



Yo-Yo Ma Plays the Music of John Williams

Sony SK 89670
(Download at iTunes.com)
One of Williams's closest collaborators in non-film works ranging from richly melodic to impressionistic.