

From Steiner to Williams

Masters of the Silver Screen

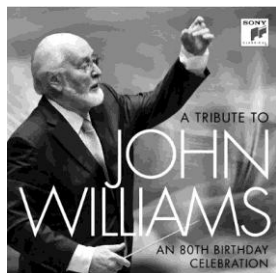
Last in a series charting the history of film music

'Fine symphonic scores for motion pictures cannot help but influence mass acceptance of fine music' – Erich Wolfgang Korngold

John Williams: Present-day master

IN THE FIRST PART of this series (*Bulletin*, Spring 2011), Max Steiner was identified as the original master of the film-music genre. The undisputed modern-day master is surely John Williams. New York-born Williams's music for the cinema is arguably the most popular and recognisable of all time. There are interesting parallels to be drawn between Steiner's pioneering score for *King Kong* in 1933 and Williams's memorably ominous themes for *Jaws* in 1975. Once again we are asked to empathise with a 'monster' being pursued by humans to the point of destruction, and again maximum on-screen terror effects are only fully realised through the music. The main 'shark' theme is simply two recurring bass notes a semitone apart, mostly used to merely suggest the animal's proximity. This remains one of the most familiar themes in cinema history.

The young John Williams (born 1932) had solid film music grounding during the latter part of the Golden Age, having worked as a pianist and arranger with the likes of Franz Waxman, Bernard Herrmann, and Alfred Newman who encouraged Williams into composing.



Jaws was not the first time Williams had worked with director Steven Spielberg, but it was, for both of them, the big breakthrough in terms of hugely popular blockbuster movies. *The Sugarland*

Express (1974) saw the beginning of the ultimate in director-composer collaborations. Williams has to date scored 25 of Spielberg's 26 films which include *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the *Indiana Jones* series, *E.T.*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List*, almost all provided with memorable musical soundtracks. The productions of *Schindler's List* and *Jurassic Park* overlapped during 1993, and the contrasting subject matter of a holocaust movie and a prehistoric fantasy was evidence of the versatility of these two artists. Williams has of course worked with many other directors on very successful ventures, not least the six *Star Wars* outings with George Lucas. Other films include *J.F.K.*, *Nixon*, two *Home Alone* movies, the *Superman* and *Harry Potter* series, and recently *The War Horse*. There are many others. John Williams has to date won four Academy awards.

Around the World

PREVIOUS ARTICLES in this series have concentrated on film music emerging from Hollywood and British studios, but there was, of course, a movie industry elsewhere which similarly included significant composer-director collaborations. In the Soviet Union, Sergei Prokofiev provided the score for

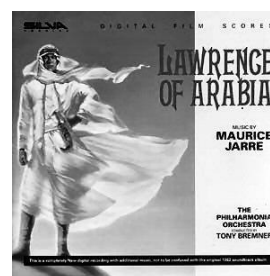
Sergei Eisenstein's historical epics: *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and two separate instalments of *Ivan the Terrible* (1944 and 1945). Earlier, Prokofiev had devised a suite from his 1933 score for *Lieutenant Kizhe*. The composer also developed his score for *Alexander Nevsky* and the resulting dramatic cantata for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and orchestra regularly features in the concert hall. Dmitri Shostakovich was famously a piano accompanist for silent films ensuring a good understanding of what was required when he turned to composing for the cinema. His best works, though, only came after the Stalin era when the composer had fallen out of favour with the authorities.

In the last 40 years the Indian film industry (which includes Bollywood productions) has become the world's most prolific, turning out a huge number of films annually. In the 1950s the celebrated director Satyajit Ray set India on the way with his 'Apu Trilogy' and turned to the virtuoso sitar player Ravi Shankar to write the musical score.

From 1952 to 1978 the highly prolific Italian Nino Rota provided scores for many of the films of director Federico Fellini, including *La Strada* (1954), *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *Satyricon* (1969). Rota's Italian roots made him an ideal choice as composer for Francis Ford Coppola's hugely successful Mafia saga *The Godfather* (1972). He also scored the sequel, *The Godfather Part II* (1974), but died before *Part III* appeared in 1990. Rota won an Academy Award for *Part II*.

Maurice Jarre: Lawrence of Arabia

MY INTEREST in film music was sparked when, as an 11-year-old, I went to see the extraordinary epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), yet another outstanding David Lean feature. I remember being transfixed at the incredible desert photography, as young intelligence officer TE Lawrence gets involved in the Arab revolt against the Turks during World War I. I'm sure I wouldn't have fully understood the plot, but no matter, the spectacle, all accompanied by the most glorious musical score of Frenchman Maurice Jarre, brought the desert to life. Jarre was responsible for another memorable score in 1965: *Doctor Zhivago*.



Return of the 'western'

ONE OF CINEMA'S most successful partnerships emerged from Italy in the 1960s, when director Sergio Leone revived a genre that had all but died in Hollywood: the 'western'. Leone's so-called spaghetti westerns (they were actually Italian/Spanish/German co-productions) owed much of their success to the

distinctive and highly original music of Ennio Morricone. The ‘Dollar Trilogy’, starring Clint Eastwood as the Man with No Name, began with *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and continued with *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Morricone’s music, still popular today, consisted of instrumental combinations and sound effects never before heard in films, including dissonant harmonica, shouting chorus, cracking whips, chiming bells, and famously, the whistling and Fender Stratocaster electric guitar of Italian musician Alessandro Alessandroni. The 1966 film’s theme was based on the wail of a coyote. The next spaghetti western - now without Eastwood - was *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and here another mysterious stranger (played by Charles Bronson) is represented by a sad harmonica theme which recurs throughout, its purpose only revealed in the film’s famous denouement. These films are often described as ‘operatic’ and they feature many dialogue-free sequences, accompanied by Morricone’s distinctive themes. One commentator has observed that ‘the arias aren’t sung, they are stared!’

Morricone’s movie career has continued with over 400 scores to date and many of his film themes remain as popular as ever.

John Barry: Best of British

JOHN BARRY, BORN IN YORK IN 1933, is another hugely prolific, and probably Britain’s most celebrated, composer for the cinema in both Hollywood and the UK. Barry’s father owned a number of theatres and cinemas in Yorkshire and young John devoured screenings from an early age, noting especially the wonder of the accompanying music. Whilst on National Service he played trumpet in the army band, and in the sixties he became something of a pop star. He is possibly best known for composing the soundtracks for the seemingly never-ending James Bond franchise, and was hugely



John Barry with one of his many awards

influential in formulating the distinctive style for those films. (The original 007 theme was in fact an arrangement by Barry, the original composer, Monty Berman, finally establishing authorship in a 2001 court case.) Starting with *Dr No* in 1962, Barry went on to write for a further ten Bond pictures – many of them featuring hit songs - including *From Russia with Love* (1963), *Goldfinger* (1964), *Thunderball* (1965) and *Diamonds are Forever* (1971).

The Bond scores feature but one of Barry’s music styles; the impressive score for *Zulu* (1964) and the atmospheric cold-war sound created by a Hungarian

cimbalom in *The Ipcress File* (1965) are just two early examples of a completely different approach. In terms of awards, John Barry achieved five Oscar successes: score and song for *Born Free* (1966), *The Lion in Winter* (1968), and the beautiful soundtracks for *Out of Africa* (1985) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990). His final film was *Enigma* (2001), the Bletchley Park codebreakers story. John Barry died in 2011 leaving a wonderful legacy; the quantity of his rich and varied output is easily matched by its quality.

Composers’ headaches!

THE BIG MONEY NEEDED to fund Hollywood inevitably involved powerful financial investors, executives and producers who wielded absolute power over all the creative artists, and many were musically illiterate. There are legendary tales to illustrate this: one composer was told that as the film was set in France – well, he must use French horns! Another requested that a solo flute should play full chords, and yet another insisted that ‘Brahms be flown out to Hollywood!’ Miklós Rózsa was not impressed to overhear his producer shouting to the sound editor during post-production: ‘Louder, LOUDER, I can still hear the music!’ Directors could also be a problem. David Raksin, when scoring *Lifeboat* in 1944, was challenged by Hitchcock who questioned that an audience might not expect a symphony orchestra to be playing in mid-ocean. When told of this Raksin retorted: ‘Ask him where the camera comes from and I’ll tell him where the music comes from!’

IN THIS SERIES OF ARTICLES I have barely scratched the surface of the film music genre. There are very many composers (and arrangers) that haven’t been mentioned who have their place in cinema’s musical history: Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith, Henry Mancini, Alex North, and more recently Danny Elfman, Hans Zimmer, James Newton Howard, Howard Shore, Alexandre Desplat ... the list goes on.

THE RESURGENCE OF INTEREST IN FILM music over the last 35 years or so can be traced back to when conductor, record producer and arranger Charles Gerhardt released a complete album of Korngold film music. ‘The Sea Hawk: Classic Film Scores of Erich Wolfgang Korngold’ became the first of the successful Classic Film Scores series issued on RCA, long since deleted but occasionally available (second-hand) on Amazon and eBay; they have, though, been re-released by ArkivMusic in the US. A number of record companies have since followed in RCA’s pioneering footsteps to mine the treasure trove of cinematic music, notably Silva Screen, Chandos, Varese Sarabande and Marco Polo (now Naxos), among others, and LSO Live are about to join them.

In modern times most films of note have a corresponding soundtrack CD readily available. In cinema’s early days sound quality was decidedly ‘Lo-Fi’, but the high quality orchestrations of many classic film scores have been recreated and their splendour can now be fully appreciated. The film music collector has never been better served. ●

Paul Astell