

The Theme from “Star Wars”

John Williams (1932 -)

FAME, March 2005

Suggested docent costume: Brown robe, headband and foam light saber (on cart)

(Play Track 1 of “ John Williams” CD) Raise your hand when you think you know what this music is from. Those of you who said “Star Wars” are right!

This music was composed and conducted by one of the most popular and successful American orchestral composers of the modern age, John Williams. He has been the winner of five Academy Awards, 17 Grammys, three Golden Globes, two Emmys and five BAFTA Awards (from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts). You might recognize his name as one of the nominees for best musical score in the most recent Academy Awards ceremony. While he is probably best known for his film scores and ceremonial music, Williams is also a noted composer of concert works and a world famous conductor.

(Bring up five volunteers and give them each one of the following: Olympic rings, whip, shark’s fin, eye glasses, light saber.)

Let’s listen to more of his work to see what else you might recognize. The volunteers are holding some clues to help you. *(Play Track 2) Can anyone tell me what this music is from? (The Olympic Fanfare and Theme) Raise those Olympic rings! Let’s listen to another song. (Play Track 3) Have you been to Disneyland lately? Does this music remind you of any of the rides? (Yes, it’s Raiders of the Lost Ark) Hold up that whip! Let’s listen to one more. (Play Track 4) Can you tell me where this music is from? (Theme from Jaws) Don’t get too close to that shark’s fin! You’re doing well, but let’s see if you can get this one. (Play Track 5) Who is the most famous wizard we know? (Prologue from Harry Potter) Last, but not least, how about this one? (Play Track 6) Hold up that light saber! (It’s “Imperial Attack” from Star Wars)*

(Volunteers can be seated)

Let’s listen to the Star Wars Theme again. *(Play Track 7) How does it make you feel? (happy, triumphant, energetic) Can you form a picture in your mind of something big and important about to happen? John Williams accomplishes this by the use of dynamics. Who remembers what dynamics are from the FAME lesson on Camille Saint-Saens? (How loud or soft music is played) He also uses the tempo, or speed at which the music is played, to convey a sense of something impending. Could you hear that same combination of dynamics and tempo in the “Jaws” music? Did you feel like something was sneaking up on you? I did!*

What instruments did you hear in the Star Wars music? *(trumpets, drums, cymbals, flutes, violins)* Every family of instrument is represented here: brass, woodwinds, percussion and strings. John Williams composed music for all of the Star Wars movies and used

particular instruments to represent his characters, such as flutes and other woodwinds for Luke and Leia, strings for Yoda, and trumpets with other brass for that evilest of all villains – Darth Vader. He used a similar technique in the Harry Potter movie series. Hedwig, Harry’s owl, was represented by bells, while Hagrid’s dragon, Fluffy, made his appearances to harp music.

Even though John Williams has written music for so many movies, he still manages to make them sound fresh and unique. His greatest gift seems to be his ability to dramatically and stylistically change musical sounds within the same film. Think of the dramatic sounds he used in the beginning of the “Star Wars” movies and contrast that with the fun and light sounds connected with the Droids or Yoda. It’s no wonder that John Williams is known as “America’s Composer.”

Biography

So, let’s talk a little about the man himself. Because John Williams is the only one of our FAME composers who is still alive today, we know a lot about him.

He was born in New York in 1932, the oldest child of Esther and Johnny Williams, a jazz percussionist. Music played an important part in the lives of John, and his two brothers and sister. From the age of seven he studied piano, and he also learned to play the trombone, the trumpet and the clarinet. After moving to Los Angeles with his family in 1948, he attended UCLA and studied composition. He was drafted into the Air Force in 1952, where as part of his tour of duty he conducted and arranged music for service bands. After his discharge in 1954, he returned to New York to attend the famed Juilliard School of Music, where he studied piano. While living in New York, he worked as a jazz pianist, both in clubs and for recordings. After returning to Los Angeles he began to work in the film industry, where he became famous for the music he wrote for many television shows.

John Williams was married for eighteen years to his wife, Barbara. She died in 1974 of a cerebral hemorrhage. He married his second wife, Samantha Winslow, a photographer and interior decorator in 1980. His sons Joseph and Mark are both musicians and his daughter, Jennifer, is a doctor.

Williams is undoubtedly one of the most respected composers alive today. He has led countless national and international orchestras, most notably as the nineteenth conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra from 1980-1993. It was the Boston Pops that you heard playing most of the music we’ve heard today. He has composed music for close to eighty films and has composed some of the most famous themes ever written for cinema. In addition to the ones we listened to, you might recognize “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” “E.T.,” “Jurassic Park,” “Home Alone,” “Schindler’s List,” “Fiddler on the Roof” and the list goes on.

So, keep your ears open the next time you’re in the movie theater or watching television and hear a beautiful and lively musical score. Check those credits, it may very well be the work of today’s composer!