

Is Movie



John Williams, seen below with frequent director Steven Spielberg and at right in a recording session for *Star Wars*, has had unusual success negotiating his double life as a composer of film and concert music. As a conductor, he has led performances of film music, including his own score to *E.T.* (large photo, with the New York Philharmonic).

In August, Richard Kaufman conducted an Atlanta Symphony Orchestra concert of film music at the Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre, accompanied by clips from films like *Citizen Kane*, emceed by film historian Robert Osborne.



Jeff Pfallman

David James

Music the New Classical?

by Jack Sullivan



ONCE REVEILED BY THE CLASSICAL music establishment, film music is making a formidable comeback. The New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, and Atlanta Symphony Orchestra regularly program film music; special series such as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's "Friday Night at the Movies" and the Hartford Symphony Orchestra's "A Symphonic Night at the Movies" are thriving. Philip Glass, Michael Nyman, John Corigliano, and other prominent orchestral composers are producing successful film scores; Sony, Naxos, Marco Polo, and many other labels are pouring out CDs of music by Bernard Herrmann, Nina Rota, Ennio Morricone, and John Williams, with maestros like Riccardo Muti and Esa-Pekka Salonen on the covers in solemn "classical" poses as if they are conducting Beethoven. ▶

Chris Lee

At least some segments of the classical industry are grabbing onto movie music as a way to survive in a treacherous environment, viewing it as a form uniquely capable of spreading symphonic culture to a new generation at a time when many commentators worry about the dwindling number of young listeners in concert halls. As John Williams, Hollywood's premier composer, recently told me, film music is a "unified art form" capable of reaching across boundaries of age, ethnicity, and class, not to mention the classical-pop divide. In an era of globalization where, as Williams says, the multinationals seem to make "more than the treasury departments of various countries," film music has a special

large numbers of young people to venues like New York's Frederick P. Rose Hall and Carnegie Hall. With his mix of jazz, flamenco, tango, Middle Eastern chant, and post-Ligeti expressionism, Golijov is picking up where Philip Glass left off, drawing new faces into the classical-music audience. The day I talked with him he was ecstatic and anxious about his next project with Francis Ford Coppola, whose film *Tetro* Golijov was beginning work on that very day; the two had previously worked together on Coppola's 2007 film *Youth Without Youth*. Golijov rhapsodized about the appeal of movie music for symphonic composers. "Great film directors come up with ideas that take

happened to like my music. Before, I was always happy to just go to the movies in a state of wonder, like a child." This chance element goes back to the film industry's earliest days. European masters like Franz Waxman (1906-67) and Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957) were driven to Hollywood largely by historical accident. "Our careers are as much what happens to us as what we plan to do," says Williams. "For Korngold, if it hadn't been for Mr. Hitler he never would have come over here and probably never would have done film music. It's probably the last thing in 1928 that Korngold would have imagined for himself."

Modest and soft-spoken, Williams is a prolific film composer who occasionally writes concert music "for my edification and instruction, and even a small degree of pleasure. Most of what I have accomplished in music—what little I may have done—probably will rest in the area of film music. I can't claim to have done so much work in the concert area." Yet his concert output, including a new Viola Concerto and Duo Concertante for violin and viola, is extensive. Williams is especially fond of concertos, where he derives "wonderful inspiration from players." Esteemed by his symphonic colleagues in a way that most movie composers are not, he has written concertos for principal players in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, and New York Philharmonic, as well as symphonic suites derived from his film scores. His recent piece for cello and orchestra, based on themes from *Memoirs of a Geisha*, was premiered by Yo-Yo Ma at Tanglewood in 2006.

No one has been more successful over a longer span than Williams in bridging Hollywood and Carnegie Hall. Golijov regards Williams as "a master who combines high inspiration with great craftsmanship"; he says that placing Williams next to his colleagues in film music is like comparing Mozart to his now-forgotten contemporaries.

Williams's success in negotiating his double life is unusual. The Korngold-Waxman generation had a much harder time bridging the classical-Hollywood divide. In their era, the intelligentsia openly disdained movie music, using it as an automatic metaphor for anything sentimental or simple-minded. Stravinsky



edge. "It's a larger audience than symphonic music can have, just because of the way the material is disseminated.

John Mauceri, currently chancellor of the UNC School of the Arts, has been a longtime advocate of film music. Last November, he led the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra at the Vienna Konzerthaus (above) during a festival devoted to film composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, seen in a projected photo above the stage with his wife and son.

For better or worse, the audience for film music, even in an unconscious way, is multinational and enormous." In 2006, the League of American Orchestras recognized Williams's achievements, giving him its annual Gold Baton Award for writing orchestral music for film, television, and concert hall that has become "an indelible part of America's cultural fabric, inspiring millions of listeners worldwide." Previous recipients include Leonard Bernstein in 1959, actor Danny Kaye in 1973, and conductor Robert Shaw in 1988.

The lure of movie music goes well beyond pragmatic considerations. One of the latest symphonic film composers is the 47-year-old Osvaldo Golijov, whose large-scale Passions, operas, concertos, song cycles, and chamber works draw

you places you wouldn't otherwise go," he said. "With a symphonic commission, you are more restricted. A movie can take your imagination to a whole new dimension." Golijov finds the experience of working with a musically savvy director like Coppola—whose father played flute for Toscanini—to be invigorating: "You learn something new even when you write an uninspired cue." With film, he says, it's possible to constantly take chances, experiment, and learn from failure.

Like many in the field, Golijov never planned to write movie music. "It was a fluke," he recalls. "A few directors

Hollywood and Classical Music

Remember *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the movie where Richard Dreyfuss plays a composer who becomes a music teacher? Or the ones about cellist Jacqueline du Pré (*Hilary and Jackie*), a castrato singer (*Farinelli*), and Mozart (*Amadeus*)? Those films mostly span the 1980s and 1990s, but Hollywood's love affair with classical music has been going on for a long, long time. There have been rollicking comedies (the Marx Brothers' 1935 *A Night at the Opera*); suspense films with a musical score as the key to an assassination plot (Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1934 and 1956); *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937), starring Deanna Durbin and featuring Leopold Stokowski as himself; and *Humoresque* (1946), about a tortured romance between a classical violinist (John Garfield) and his lover/patron (Joan Crawford).

Mozart isn't the only composer the film industry has dipped into. There's Beethoven (*Immortal Beloved*, 1995,

starring Gary Oldman); Mahler (that's *Alma* Mahler, in *Bride of the Wind*, 2002); Beethoven again (*Copying Beethoven*, 2006) and again (in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 *A Clockwork Orange*, where the thuggish main character's favorite composer is "lovely Ludwig van"); and even the fairly obscure Marin Marais (*Tous Les Matins du Monde*, 1991).

Most often, it's not composers but performers who have captured Hollywood's interest. There are films aplenty that feature struggling musicians, like *Carnegie Hall* (1947), about a mother (Marsha Hunt) and her pianist son (William Prince), in which real-life musicians Artur Schnabel, Jascha Heifetz, Bruno Walter, and Walter Damrosch appear. The 1996 film *Shine* tackles the mental pressures suffered by another pianist, David Helfgott, obsessed with the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto. Possibly one of the silliest pianist portrayals is in *Green Card*, a 1990 romance starring French

actor Gérard Philipe as a pianist who falls in love with Andie MacDowell. The piano is endlessly fascinating—four more that come to mind are *The Pianist* (2002), *The Competition* (1980), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), and *The Piano* (1993)—but occasionally other instruments have gotten some screen attention, as in *The Red Violin* (1999), which features a score by John Corigliano.

Youngsters trying to make their way as performers always have screen appeal (*Fame*, 1980), while offbeat and sometimes hilarious portrayals of musicians abound, from Woody Allen as a cellist in a marching band in *Take the Money and Run* (1969) to Warren Beatty's soprano saxophone-playing football player in *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) and Sigourney Weaver's cello-playing Dana Barrett in *Ghost Busters* (1984).

Over the years, we've seen Hollywood's screen musicians bowing away when no music is emanating from their string instruments, playing scales on

AMADEUS, Thomas Hulce, 1984

Warner Bros. / Courtesy: Everett Collection



the piano that are impossible based on where their hands are placed, and leading orchestras but not moving the baton at the right time. For trained musicians, it's impossible not to laugh at mistakes that seem so obvious and easy to avoid, but I suspect that most of us are happier when the actor is doing the actual performing, the way Hugh Laurie, star of Fox TV's hit series *House*, does when he plays the piano on that show. He plays a brilliant medical doctor who also happens to be a brilliant pianist. Of course.

—Jennifer Melick

ridiculed Rachmaninoff's symphonic work as "grandiose film music"; conductor Otto Klemperer, upon hearing that Korngold was working for Hollywood, scoffed that he "had always composed for Warner Brothers, he just didn't realize it." Summing up the attitude of many of his colleagues in a *New York Times* piece in 1945, conductor Erich Leinsdorf blasted film scores as "odious" and "absurd," a form hopelessly compromised by "the demands of standardization and pattern."

As John Mauceri, founding director of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra and now chancellor of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, points out, these standardization demands are not used against other composers whose incidental music is played in concert: "You don't hold it against Tchaikovsky that he wrote *Sleeping Beauty* to certain requirements or Bach that he had to write a new cantata every Sunday whether he was inspired or not."

Nevertheless, critics denounced Hollywood music as shallow and degenerate—ironically, the very terms the Nazis had used to drive Korngold, Waxman, Ernst Toch, and their colleagues out of Germany and into the film industry, where (with Max Steiner already blazing the trail) they created the sound of Golden Age Hollywood. Mauceri believes these denunciations are a "fake aesthetic" masking a profound resentment that so many great German composers came to Hollywood.

Academics piled on as well. Railing against the Hollywood "culture industry," music critic/philosopher Theodor Adorno singled out movie music as particularly insidious because its artificially "warm" nineteenth-century idiom seduced audiences into forgetting they were being manipulated by a "cold" consumer machine. The biggest sin of composers like Korngold, Steiner, and Dimitri Tiomkin was apparently their success. No one denounced Igor Stravinsky

or Arnold Schoenberg for their abortive attempts at writing for Hollywood—indeed, their failures were badges of honor. Nor were critics as hard on Sergei Prokofiev, Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Walton, Dmitri Shostakovich or others who made only modest money from the French, British, or Russian cinema. Composing for American pictures, where one could actually make a living, carried a special taint.

"Sounds Like Movie Music"

The atmosphere is obviously more positive now, but we still practice a curious doublethink. Even critics normally friendly to the genre regularly use "sounds like movie music" to dismiss a new work they deem saccharine or overblown. I've caught myself using this damning cliché, even though I've loved the genre since being blown out of my chair by Steiner's score for *The Searchers* more than 50 years ago. According to Golijov, the prejudice is now much

more limited and specific, coming mainly from the older generation and “academic modernists” in the U.S., Germany, and France; his own generation of composers has not been affected by it, nor have such late-twentieth-century contributors to the film genre as Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996) and Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998).

But one almost never hears a symphony orchestra program a film piece by a master composer—a Korngold or Herrmann overture, for instance—on a regular subscription concert, as opera overtures are. Richard Kaufman, who conducts regular film-music series with the symphony orchestras of Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and Utah, among others, tells me that some orchestra managers “don’t even want to know about film music. They’re afraid it will detract from an appreciation of classical, that it will dumb the audience down. Why not have confidence in the audience to appreciate many kinds of music?”

Common sense should tell us that they can. Kids brought up on movie music frequently move on to classical

and experience the two genres as closely related. On two recent occasions, I’ve taken students in my American Studies classes at Rider University to John Williams concerts with the New York Philharmonic. Many told me this was their first exposure to symphonic music—and that they loved it. This fall I’m taking the next step, bringing them to hear Marin Alsop conduct Dvorák’s “New World” Symphony with the New York Philharmonic. My thirteen-year-old son can happily sit through a Mahler symphony, but only because I began by brainwashing him with *Close Encounters* and *Indiana Jones*.

Audiences do not have a torturous ambivalence about film music. They have always loved it. Kaufman told me that initially skeptical principal players, once reluctant to perform in film programs, are now on board. “There is less and less snobbism now,” Kaufman says. “Once really fine film music is put in front of the players, they recognize its quality.” Part of the reason the genre has surged, explains Kaufman, is the new availability

of movies from all periods through DVDs and downloads. “The more people go to the movies, the more they want to hear the score,” he says. Kaufman adds that when he programs concerts with film music, old and new scores are equally successful.

Kaufman is one of a growing number of musicians who view film scores as a form of classical music, a “pure art form that can stand alone very successfully in the concert hall.” Hearing movie music live, he believes, allows the audience to focus on it in a way we cannot while watching the film, where the score is compromised by dialogue, noise, and of course the visual image. The very constraints of the form—the necessity of advancing narrative, character, and dialogue—are also the music’s strength; as the late Elmer Bernstein once said, the film composer’s most important trait is that he or she “must be a great dramatist.” In Kaufman’s words, the score “must be emotionally and dramatically based.”

Before the April 2008 premiere by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra of Golijov’s suite from *Youth Without Youth*. “I was very scared,” Golijov says. “Film music is not really the same as opera, where the music is the ‘film.’ In a movie, music is only one voice in the counterpoint; you don’t know how it will stand by itself. Fortunately, the reception was very good, and the piece went on to be played in Amsterdam.”

Hearing Without Seeing?

Often, the score is not only compelling on its own but the best thing about the picture. Directors who know they are presiding over a bomb sometimes admit this terrible secret. Maurice Jarre once told me that after *Topaz* (1969), Hitchcock took him aside and said, “I didn’t give you a great picture, but you gave me a great score.” On the other hand, a score can help keep a great film alive: This year, the fiftieth anniversary of *Vertigo*, we should not forget that recordings of Herrmann’s incomparable music kept Hitchcock’s film spiraling through our imaginations during the near-decade when it disappeared from circulation.

Nevertheless, some believe that the score should not be segregated from the film and that the best way to present film music is to play it live in tandem with clips. “Live from Lincoln Center” Executive Producer John Gorman, an innovative producer



Photo: Florida State University Photo Lab

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

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of film-music series, insists that “to hear what the composers intended, you should see the images. The film *is* the form of the music.” From his André Previn/Los Angeles Philharmonic *Alexander Nevsky* in 1987 to his recent *Wizard of Oz* success with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in May 2008, with film clips projected as the orchestra played live, Goberman has presented concert-film fusions around the world. These are not screenings, he insists, but “performances of the film, with the energy of 100 live musicians. The audience is seeing what the composer had in mind.”

What will happen in the future is hard to predict. The recent deaths of cinema-music giants David Raksin, Elmer Bernstein, and Jerry Goldsmith—responsible for scores like *Laura*, *The Magnificent Seven*, and *Chinatown*—have left a sudden void. “No one knows whether the field will be degraded in 50 years,” says Williams, though he believes our addiction to computers and visual stimulation bodes well for the field. “We are visual addicts. It’s harder for the younger generation of people to listen to Beethoven and be completely engaged in a way that from a purist point of view we would prefer them to be. But I think to ignore that fact is going to be ignoring reality: The audio-visual coupling as expressed in film music is something that is really with us to stay because of the way we live. As a consequence, I think it will have a bright future, and I hope a good one. I think younger people will recognize the importance of these trends, the irrevocability of the link between visual and aural. And as musicians, they’ll approach the opportunity to write for film very seriously.”

Right now the field is wildly eclectic, encompassing the minimalism of Nyman (*Man on Wire*) and Glass (*The Hours*), the sinister lyricism of James Newton Howard (*The Village*) and Danny Elfman (*Edward Scissorhands*), the subtle wit of Rachel Portman (*Emma*), the bombast of Howard Shore (*Lord of the Rings*) and James Horner (*Titanic*), the icy modernism of Jonny Greenwood (in the remarkable score for *There Will Be Blood*), and much else. Golijov, whose world-music style is neither minimalist nor neo-Romantic, has taken the form in a new direction. With its Eastern chant, raspy percussion, zippy tangos, and exotic cimbalom, *Youth Without*

Youth sounds like no one but Golijov himself. Since the Eastern European motifs of *Schindler’s List* (1993) and the ethereal Asian textures heard in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), Williams’s most striking recent achievement, in Golijov’s estimation, is *Munich* (2005), where Williams “approaches the score like a young person,” using ouds and Middle Eastern street music in ways “new and subtle.”

Thirty years ago, no one could have predicted the stubborn resilience of symphonic music in film, as prominent today as it was in Hollywood’s Golden Age. Indeed, Herrmann’s death in 1975 seemed to many the last nail in the coffin for big, expensive orchestral scores, which were falling victim to synthesizers and pop tracks. Then in 1977, something called *Star Wars* burst into theaters, powered by a huge blast from the London Symphony Orchestra. The stunning success of Williams’s score highlighted the unique capabilities of a symphony orchestra.

“The orchestra is a fabulous tool and always has been and still is very much with

us,” says Williams. “It isn’t applicable to every film that comes along, but when it’s needed, there’s nothing that we’ve invented yet that’s a better instrument to deliver the emotional impact that it can.”

What’s distinctive about the best film scores is that they are instantly recognizable and unforgettable; they evoke an image—a landscape, a tracking shot, a close-up of a face—indelibly linked to sound. In Golijov’s words, the attraction of film music lies in the ability of its best practitioners to “conjure in a few seconds the essence of a film.” In a brief stroke, a composer can move millions. As Golijov asks, “To create a memorable moment of such deep emotion that people will remember it the rest of their lives: What else can you aspire to?” **S**

Jack Sullivan, the author of *Hitchcock’s Music* (2007 winner of an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award) and *New World Symphonies: How American Culture Changed European Music* (1999), is director of American Studies and professor of English at Rider University.



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