



BUT FIRST ...

## The View from Here

Why isn't John Williams treated like Igor Stravinsky?



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*In the grandest concert halls and opera houses of Europe and the United States, the work of 20th-century American composers—often immigrants who escaped Fascism in Europe, some of whom wrote music for films—is rarely afforded the same esteem as the work of European composers who composed experimental, non-tonal music.*

*John Mauceri, the esteemed American conductor, puts forward a passionate indictment of the suppression of an entire musical tradition, and offers his thoughts on a possible solution.*

**D**uring the last weeks of 2022, two events gave us hope for a breakthrough in upending the tragedy of 20th-century classical music. The tragedy is that such music has been solely defined in terms of “modernism,” specifically the explosive experiments of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky in the years surrounding World War I.

The events that gave us hope were, first, John Williams, at the age of 90, making his Italian conducting debut with the orchestra of La Scala. He preceded the glittering sold-out gala with debut concerts with the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonics.

Arguably, these institutions constitute the trifecta of Europe's greatest and most conservative classical institutions—which have long ignored “Hollywood composers.”

Second, the Berlin Philharmonic toured the United States with its newly appointed principal conductor, Kirill Petrenko, in a repertory that included Erich Wolfgang Korngold's rarely performed Symphony in F sharp. *The Sunday Times* followed this performance with an interview in which the world's greatest tenor, Jonas Kaufmann, is quoted as saying, “Korngold was a genius and this opera [*Die Tote Stadt* (The Dead City)] should be much more in the limelight. People think it sounds like film music, but that's because Korngold was one of the inventors of the film music style which we still enjoy today.”

Could this be a sign that a much-needed redefinition of what constitutes contemporary classical music might be at hand?

We should see the music of American 20th-century composers such as Williams and Korngold as lost cultural heritage. There are organizations devoted to restoring lost heritage, such as the [Monuments Men and Women Foundation](#), which seeks to find works of art stolen in the Second World War. Unfortunately it does not deal with music.



John Mauceri with Miklós Rózsa in 1989.

Music can't be stolen, but it can be suppressed. Those European musicians who survived the war in America and composed music as American citizens, such as Paul Hindemith, Miklós Rózsa, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, have been tacitly banned from performance in Europe's grandest venues for 75 years. The Germans and Italians may have lost the war, but they still claim a cultural superiority when it comes to defining classical music.

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That is why the arrival of the Berlin Philharmonic last November with the monumental Korngold symphony created general chaos among American classical-music critics. These critics have, almost without exception, followed the European postwar critical assessment that the classical music largely composed by Jewish refugees, which did not adhere to the doctrine of the new atonal avant-garde, was *kitsch*.

One important American newspaper previewed the Korngold concert—the first time the symphony had been played in New York in 45 years—by describing it as “weary, burdened, at times even angry to be fighting its battles once again ... remarkably hollow.”

The reviewer seemed to imagine an aging and exhausted Korngold fighting against the triumph of modernism. He was not. Like the vast majority of 20th-century composers, he was writing music in his unique voice—a voice that had been hailed by Mahler, Puccini, and Strauss. That he was uninterested in the endless experiments that have so alienated audiences for more than 100 years is a testament to his profound sense of security in who he was and how he wanted to express himself.

This brings us to John Williams, whose music, like that of all his Hollywood colleagues, has been snubbed by “serious” classical institutions for decades. No one better deserves his place in the hearts and souls of a grateful world for his immense achievements.

A musician who went to La Scala to hear Williams's recent concert told me he was astonished by the crowd's reaction to it. “The frenzy surrounding John's presence was just insane. As he left the building in a taxi, people were singing “The Raiders March” [the theme from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*] to him. I wonder when the last time was that La Scala experienced this kind of atmosphere.”

There are two questions this raises. Fifteen years ago, Williams turned 75. There were no birthday concerts in Vienna, Berlin, and Milan then. Why now? Secondly, where did John Williams's music come from? It was not just Williams who made his debut: his *music* made its debut with those institutions. We are always describing classical music in terms of its inspiration, its history, and its continuity. Let us do the same for him.

The answer to the first question comes, I think, from the musicians themselves. The greatest classical instrumentalists and opera singers have grown up in a post-*Star Wars* world in which John's music is the soundtrack of their lives. His music is symphonic and complex, with eight horns, harps, ethereal strings, magnificent marches, and memorable themes that develop and morph. Before many of these players heard Beethoven, Verdi, and Mahler, they heard Williams, and they continue to hear him. He is, after all, a living composer of contemporary music.

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The answer to the second question is clear. John Williams's music is the product of the inspiration of those first refugee geniuses—trained in Europe's greatest conservatories—whose lives were saved in the United States. We can hear the DNA of Korngold's *Kings Row* in the *Star Wars* opening theme; the murderous Romans putting down the Jews in Miklós Rózsa's 1959 score to *Ben-Hur* in John Williams's “Imperial March” theme for Darth Vader; and the prototype of the rhythmic two-note ostinato that is called *Jaws* in Franz Waxman's murder motif in his *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

This gets us to the issue of the Monuments Men and Women Foundation, because in talking about Williams's precursors we are dealing with a suppressed cultural heritage. The German Nazis, the Italian Fascists, and the Soviet Communists all had strict control over what music could be played and composed. For differing reasons, it was easy to ban non-tonal “experimental” music since few people embraced it. After the war, the United States supported this same music because it was decreed anti-Nazi, anti-Fascist, and anti-Communist.

The damaged young European composers are not to blame for creating this non-tonal music. They grew up in the ghastly rubble of a war they hardly understood and expressed their understandable attitude toward the impossibility of beauty in their music. But here we are today, 75 years later, regurgitating the old politically inspired aesthetics and its post-traumatic expression.

One American critic recently described the unabashedly beautiful opera *The Hours*, by Kevin Puts, as being “achingly — almost painfully — pretty,” and that “the tear-jerking gets tiring.” Perhaps someone might point out that a principal reason people go to the opera is to cry—to cry at its beauty and for the stories it tells. Consider *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *La Traviata*.

The most recent Italian opera performed in the current classical repertory is Puccini's *Turandot*, which was left incomplete in 1924. A hundred years of Italian opera has been banned from our stages because the composers either lived in Italy—and tacitly accepted the regime—or abandoned their homeland, either to save their lives or express their revulsion with Mussolini. There are hundreds of works that cry out for re-discovery, even if this means Italy must finally come to terms with a deeply embarrassing episode in its grand musical history.

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Perhaps Korngold's current “re-discovery” will finally open the gates to the hundreds of symphonic composers who were forced to flee Europe during the war, and then were thoroughly humiliated by the postwar European and American cultural elite.

John Williams's genius lies in his willingness to continue developing the traditions brought to America by the Europeans who wrote for Hollywood. They were not writing movie music. They were in fact writing music that naturally embraced the cultural lineage of Richard Strauss—who was alive at the time—Mahler, Wagner, and Puccini. Williams is one of the second generation of America-trained geniuses, a generation that includes Bernard Herrmann, Alex North, Jerry Goldsmith, and Elmer Bernstein. Their music has been heard and appreciated by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world on soundtracks, but rarely, if ever, in the great concert halls.

And so, Maestro Kirill Petrenko and Jonas Kaufmann are Monuments Men for our time, saving our lost cultural heritage. Where are the others? If the Korngold violin concerto has finally been accepted as “classical,” where are the celebrated soloists to give us the Rózsa concerto and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Concerto No. 2, both inspired by Jascha Heifetz? Is there an opera house to stage Korngold's *Das Wunder der Heliane*? An orchestra to explore the great Hindemith symphonies composed in New Haven, Connecticut? If Scala, Berlin, and Vienna slip back to their standard artistic policies and the United States continues to follow their lead, then this moment will have been lost—and we shall all continue to be the losers.

There is so much glorious music from the last century. Yes, return the art. But also play the music!🎻

*John Mauceri is the author of [The War on Music—Reclaiming the Twentieth Century](#) (Yale University Press) and was the musical adviser to the Todd Field film *Tár*, starring Cate Blanchett*

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