

John Williams

(b. 1932)

Selections from *Star Wars*, *The Cowboys*, *Jaws*, *Hook*, *Harry Potter*, *Schindler's List*, *Superman*, *E.T.*, and more

Composed: c. 1970–c. 2000s

Context: Modern orchestral music continues to thrive in the genre of film music, but while most people do not consider “classical music” and “movie music” to belong in the same category, they are in fact inseparable forms of art. Camille Saint-Saëns (known for his ‘Organ’ Symphony, piano concertos, and *Carnival of the Animals*) composed the first silent film score in 1908 in what amounted to a light, operetta style of music that loosely coordinated with the action on screen. By the 1920s, Hollywood’s film music industry was in full swing, with a Henry Ford-like assembly line of composers to sketch out themes, orchestrators to set them in full score, and ready-made studio orchestras to record the final takes on a moment’s notice, all in a matter of weeks. Movie producers frequently poached up-and-coming classical composers to work on their latest projects, often with impossible production deadlines; Erich Wolfgang Korngold (famous for both his film scores and his brilliant Violin Concerto) was so pressed for time when composing the music for the 1935 movie *Captain Blood* that he simply copied and pasted several minutes of a Liszt symphonic poem to accompany the climactic fight scenes.

John Williams grew up in this tradition and made a name for himself as a versatile composer who could write in jazz or classical idioms—a highly valued trait in Hollywood—as well as being a capable recording pianist (he played the piano part in the iconic 1959 Mancini *Peter Gunn* theme). Like so many great film score composers, Williams’ movie music descends from the late-romantic style of Liszt and Wagner, the latter of whose “leitmotif” technique (small musical gestures that represent certain characters in an opera) has since become a common feature in movie soundtracks. More than perhaps any other composer today, Williams continues to straddle the worlds of film and classical music. His concert works include several concertos written for leading soloists, such as Yo-Yo Ma, and he continues to maintain a global career as a guest conductor of symphony and pops orchestras.