

Making 'Star Wars' sing again

In London, Williams puts sound to Lucas's next adventure

By Richard Dyer, Boston Globe, March 28, 1999

LONDON - "John Williams communicates so beautifully," says George Lucas, "that I can make a silent movie."

"The Phantom Menace," the eagerly awaited first film in Lucas's new prequel trilogy to "Star Wars," isn't a silent movie. But neither were films of the "silent" era, which depended on musical accompaniment to make their full effect. Lucas knows his film history, and will quote the great Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's dictum that "film is music."

No one can think of the "Star Wars" movies without hearing John Williams's music. Williams's score has even gone beyond the films to become part of the soundtrack to people's lives. In February, Williams and the London Symphony Orchestra were back in EMI's Abbey Road Studios to record the music for "The Phantom Menace"; Lucas was there to hear his new movie for the first time.

Lucas says he loves music, and it's clear he does. He remembers the music in the films he grew up with - Liszt's "Les Preludes" introduced the old Flash Gordon serials, which were a primal source for "Star Wars." He calls the trilogy his "space opera," and there are many narrative and mythic parallels to Wagner's "Ring" cycle. He writes his scripts while he's listening to music; he listens to music when he's filming; he edits to a dummy track of existing music that gives each sequence the emotional charge he's looking for.

"You have no idea what John's music contributes to the films," says actor Anthony Daniels, who plays the golden tin man, C3-PO. "The first time I saw any of 'Star Wars,' Ravel's 'Bolero' was still on the soundtrack."

It is easy to believe Daniels. In the first trilogy, Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia was flat-voiced, as plain, prosaic, and practical as a can opener, but from the moment the flute begins to intone her theme, she becomes pure romantic enchantment. The success of the film, and of Williams's music, helped restore the romantic symphonic movie score to popularity. The gadgetry in the film, and the technology that makes it possible, are futuristic, but the story is built on classic patterns - and, the scroll at the opening reminds us, takes place "long ago" in a galaxy far away.

Now there is an even older story to be told in image and music. Most of the time, Williams meets with the directors of the films he's going to score to "spot" the scenes that are going to need music; with Lucas, he knows, "we are going to play through everything." There were 16 three-hour recording sessions to set down 900 pages of score, two full hours of music. The sessions were intense, exhausting, and utterly professional. As in every business, time means money, even though music represents only a modest proportion of the film's \$115 million budget.

Despite the necessary tension and attention, everyone was casually dressed - Lucas in jeans and cowboy belt, Williams in his usual pairing of dark pants and dark turtleneck - and there was the feeling of a family reunion. Williams was surrounded by some of his longtime associates, including sound producer Shawn Murphy and Kenneth Wannberg, who has worked as Williams's editor since "Valley of the Dolls" in 1967.

Some of the actors dropped by to listen for a while, including Ewan McGregor, who plays the young Obi-Wan Kenobi; Ian McDiarmid, who plays the evil Senator Palpatine; and Daniels, as neat as C3-PO, but not as fussy. McGregor, clean-cut and idealistic in the film, looks scruffy and unshaven in the studio, but that's because of a stage role he is playing every night. One day he brings his young daughter to the sessions, and under his breath advises her that George Lucas's jeans are not the best

place to wipe fingers covered with melted "chookies." "Star Wars" runs in the family: McGregor's uncle, Denis Lawson, appeared as a fighter pilot named Wedge in the first trilogy.

There's another special visitor. Williams introduces him to the orchestra - "Look who's here - the man who tamed dinosaurs and taught them to speak and act" - and the players applaud Steven Spielberg, whom they have already recognized with a gasp. Lucas cracks a joke at the expense of his friend since film-school days: "I just know he's going to take over ..."

Spielberg has helped Lucas make these weeks a difficult time for their old friend, whom both filmmakers address as "Johnny." Williams had completed his score to an earlier cut of the film. After consultation with Spielberg, though, Lucas had recently re-edited the sixth and final reel, the last 20 minutes of the film, which present simultaneous actions converging on the climax.

Williams tries to be philosophical about the pickle this has dropped him into. "If I hit the ground running," he says, "I can write two minutes of music a day. If I were to have started all over again on the last reel, I would be ready to record in July - with the picture already in the theaters! So I've been making the music fit as we go along. That's why I'm constantly telling the players to drop measures 7 to 14."

Gizmos and planetscapes

This is not the place to reveal secrets about "The Phantom Menace." The chases, duels, battles, and action scenes look exciting, and there are plenty of new gizmos, including a nifty double-edged light saber; there is comic relief from curious extraterrestrial creatures and humans alike; there are gorgeous images, cityscapes and planetscapes, and giant ships slice through space - the images directly reflect and expand upon the ones of the earlier films. There also seems to be a richer emotional texture: We are learning more about this story,

who these people are, and how they got that way.

In the surge of pre-opening publicity, some of the "Phantom Menace" secrets aren't so secret anymore - in fact, they haven't been secret for a while. Lucas has described the first trilogy, as the story of the redemption of Anakin Skywalker, a.k.a. Darth Vader. The three new films tell the story of how the golden child Anakin went over to the Dark Side.

Lucas says he had to know the backstory in order to write the original trilogy, but admits with a sigh that it's unlikely that he will get around to writing and filming the third trilogy he used to mention as a possible sequel.

"It's taken nearly 30 years to get this far, and there are two more films to go," Lucas says, "that will take six more years." Later, he makes a film maven's comparison to Orson Welles's "Citizen Kane." "We've seen the sled, Rosebud, and now we're back to telling the story, which across the six films and 12 hours of screen time covers 50 years. Each of the six films is a short story, not a novel. When we began, all I hoped was that we could get the first 'Star Wars' to pay for itself - and it was a very thin hope. I didn't make the movie as part of a business plan or because my intention was to make a hit movie. I made it because I liked it. And then it turned out to be a hit movie."

Asked why there was such a long delay between the two trilogies, Lucas says, "I wanted to do some other things with my life besides this. I wanted to raise my family." (Lucas's daughter Amanda, now 17, was adopted near the end of his marriage to Marcia Griffin; Lucas is also the single adoptive parent of Kate, 11, and Jet, 6.) Lucas had to wait for some of the necessary technology to be developed - by his own galaxy of companies, which were financed in part by the profits from the "Star Wars" trilogy.

From the start, Lucas had a conception of the big story he wanted to tell. Williams, on the other hand, says that back in 1977 he had no idea that he was beginning the score for a tril-

ogy - let alone a sextet. "I'm afraid I thought of it as a Saturday-afternoon movie," he says. "A good one, though." Richard Wagner wrote the text to his "Ring" cycle rather the way Lucas wrote the "Star Wars" films, working backward, but he did have the advantage of composing the operas in order, an advantage that Williams has lacked.

"The Phantom Menace" contains many of the familiar "Star Wars" themes - it was a thrill to hear the most famous of them all appear in the trumpets again - but there are also new themes for new characters. The old themes and the new ones combine as they range across the spectrum of cinematic experience. There is scary music, exciting music, tenderhearted music, comic music, noble funeral music, and music of heroic resolve.

The 8-year-old Anakin has a theme that Williams says "is the sweetest and most innocent thing you've ever heard." That's how it sounds, though alert ears will be uneasy when they realize it is built on a chromatically unstable 12-tone row. But wait a minute - isn't there something familiar about this? The principal horn player voices the question: "Isn't this Darth Vader's music?" Later in the film there is a big celebration in some kind of coliseum. There's some funny music, a children's chorus, a march. "It's struggling to be the Imperial March," Williams says. Then he shoots a rare grin. "And it's going to get there."

Composing in red and blue

As it happens, not many "Phantom Menace" secrets were revealed during close observation of four days of recording sessions. Scenes from the film were projected out of sequence and without dialogue; the color registration was off; and most of the special effects were not in the work print yet (and music editor Wannberg points out that there are 2,000 special effects in this film, which works out to an average of almost 17 special effects per minute). More often than not the images were incomplete, with a live actor appearing in front of what looked like an architectural drawing, or an old print by

Piranesi. These drawings, or just plain squiggles, represented what computers and special-effects wizards will fill in.

One of the new alien creatures in "The Phantom Menace" is called Jar Jar Binks, who looks like a friendly cross between a horse and a kangaroo; Jar Jar has eyes in the middle of his (or her) ears. (Lucas says he imagines his new species, then keeps on describing them to artists until they are able to draw what he has in mind; the process sounds a little like what police artists do in trying to create a suspect's portrait.) This may be a bit of subconscious tribute to Williams, whose superiority as a film composer lies not only in his musical ability but in his skill at reading an image and at sensing the rhythmic and emotional relationships images create in movement. Williams reads a piece of film and feels the music in it the way Schubert or Benjamin Britten heard music when they read poetry.

The condition of the work print may have been responsible for Williams's one misjudgment - about 4 seconds in the first hour of music he recorded.

The young Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman) stares out of a palace window; she sees a tower with spacecraft circling around it. Everything looks red, and when we see the tower, Williams's music surges triumphantly. Lucas doesn't cry "Cut!" the way directors do in the movies. But he does speak quietly to Williams in the control booth. He is quite clear about the emotional texture he wants. "I thought of this as a quieter, more romantic moment," Lucas says. "She's very sad. Sad and romantic - the story of my life, the story of everyone's life. The actual color here is not as red as that - it's more blue." Williams listens thoughtfully. "I was too red," he admits, "when I should have been blue. I'll fix it tonight."

Lucas is full of praise for Williams's versatility and skill. "John's music tells the story. Each character has a theme that develops and interacts with the themes of the other characters; the musical themes connect the themes of the stories and make them resonate. He also cre-

ates an emotional context for each scene. In fact you can have it both ways, because you can play a scene against the emotions that are in it because the music is there to tell you the truth. The music can communicate nuances you can't see; it says things the film doesn't say."

And Williams is confident enough with Lucas to spring some surprises of his own. Unlike Spielberg, who enjoys coming into Williams's studio at Amblin Productions in California to sit on the piano bench and listen to the music as it emerges, Lucas usually doesn't hear Williams's score until it's being recorded.

One day 88 professional singers from London Voices arrive to record two episodes with chorus. One is funeral music for one of the film's emotional climaxes; the other is for the closing credits, a terrifying, primitive pagan rite that makes even Stravinsky's "Les Noces" sound tame. Lucas loves this dark, driven music so much he shows off the recording for Spielberg when he arrives. Spielberg says to Williams, "I'm glad I didn't drop around for a cigar on the day you wrote that." Lucas says Williams doesn't know it yet, but this music will accompany a crucial scene in the third new film.

The words the chorus is singing in this dark, demonic cue are clear, but the language is unfamiliar. It turns out it's Sanskrit. ("Sanskrit!" Lucas exclaims when Williams tells him. "That'll give the fans something to figure out.") Williams had been strongly affected by a phrase from an old Welsh poem by Taliesin, "The Battle of the Trees," that the poet Robert Graves had cited and translated in "The White Goddess." "Under the tongue root, a fight most dread, /And another rages behind in the head" seemed to fit the evil ritual. Williams arranged to have these English words translated back into the original Celtic and into other ancient languages. "I chose the Sanskrit," he says, "because I loved the sound of it. I condensed this into 'most dread/inside the head,' which seemed both cryptic and appropriate. For the funeral scene, I had my own words, 'Death's long sweet sleep,' translated into Sanskrit too."

At the close of the day, Lucas, Spielberg, and Williams line up against the wall in front of a "Star Wars" poster for a television interview.

"They call you Johnny," the interviewer remarks.

"You should have seen how young I was when they met me," Williams responds.

Getting F-sharp right

High tech will be everywhere on the screen, and in the studio there's far more of it than anyone could have imagined 22 years ago, when this adventure began. Williams's score is in a computer, which produces the parts for the players; even the speakers in the control room look like 'droids from the movie. "They have all this new stuff," Williams observes, a bit ruefully. "But we're all still down there trying to make sure that F-sharp is in tune."

Williams knows that not every F-sharp will be heard; he's a team player, and Lucas praises him for that. "John knows the movie has to come first. Each participant in a movie is like a musician in an orchestra. Everybody - the sound people, the photographers, the special effects artists - has to be just as good as a soloist - but no matter how good he is, he can't be a soloist. It's my job to be the conductor."

Whether anybody will hear that F-sharp or not in the final film isn't a problem Williams lets himself worry about. Instead he concentrates on getting it right. The effect he is after may be subliminal and hidden behind dialogue, or the ricochet of light-sabers, but it is still there.

The process for each musical cue is the same. The orchestra reads the passage through- and the LSO is famed above all other orchestras for its sight-reading. Then Williams rehearses the music, sometimes repeatedly. When it is ready, the passage is recorded, sometimes several times; Williams and the orchestra listen to the advice of the producer. Williams goes into the control room to listen to the takes, often accompanied by key members of the orchestra. Then they go out again and work until they get it the way they want it. And then they move on

to the next cue. It's an exhilarating and exhausting process.

Nothing seems to ruffle Williams's composure or the old-fashioned courtesy that seems fundamental to his nature - not even 10 successive takes of the same passage. "Thank you," he says to the players after a problematic reading. "I have learned some more things that I needed to know. I think we can get it together better, and I know I can conduct it better." "Let's see if we can make a more noble sound," he will say to the brass and percussion, including himself in the equation. His experience shows in everything. "It's not too loud," he says, "but the sound is too close; it will obscure the dialogue." "Could you menace without getting louder?" he asks. "The audience should feel this rather than hear it." "Let me ask the harp not to play here - I think the sound of the harp will take the eye away from what it needs to see right here." "I'd love to take it that slowly," he says, looking at the screen, "but I can't."

Williams cannot conceal his delight, however, at how some things are turning out. He will deftly sidestep a compliment: "That's my homage to old man Korngold," he says, paying tribute to the great Viennese prodigy Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who fled from Hitler and wound up in Hollywood writing the scores to classic Warner Bros. adventure movies like "The Adventures of Robin Hood," "The Sea Hawk," and "Captain Blood." After the tremendous, charging rhythmic excitement of one cue, Williams jokes, "That ought to be enough to scare the children of the world."

When the music soars, Williams seems to soar a little too. "I'm a very lucky man," he says, smiling. "If it weren't for the movies, no one would be able to write this kind of music anymore."