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Introduction – New Perspectives on John Williams (1): Legacies and Afterlives

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EDITOR'S NOTES

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TEXT

- 1 A towering figure in film music and one particularly associated with spectacle, wonder, science fiction, and major cinematic franchises, the American composer John Williams (born in 1932) has produced a body of work that is both copious and also of considerable importance. Spanning the period from the late 1950s to the present day (*The Fabelmans*, Steven Spielberg, 2022; *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, James Mangold, 2023), his compositions cover multiple film genres and also accompany several key moments in the history of cinema; moreover, these often coincided with significant advances in the development of audiovisual technology, from Dolby Stereo and multichannel sound in 1977 to the digital transition at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s. Beyond the central role played by cinema throughout his career, Williams has also composed music in other genres, such as concert works and music for political and sporting events. A broad overview of his output thus reveals a mastery of an exceptionally wide range of musical styles across highly diverse contexts.
- 2 For a long time, Williams was largely overlooked by film musicological research, which traditionally focused instead on figures such as Max Steiner, Erich W. Korngold, and Bernard Herrmann—that is, composers belonging to the “prestigious” canon of film music (Huvet 2016). Indeed, until the early 2000s, the same perceived lack of legitimacy that often plagued blockbuster scores applied to Williams. As Pierre Berthomieu aptly noted in the mid-1990s: “The most famous composer, an almost institutional figure in American cinema,

John Williams has been associated with the greatest commercial successes of Spielberg and Lucas. An unforgivable sin.” (Berthomieu 1996, 72). Since the early 2010s, however, this situation has begun to change, with Williams being the subject of a growing and often stimulating body of scholarship. Pioneering contributions in the Anglophone academic world came in particular from Emilio Audissino and Jamie Webster, the former examining Williams’s style through the lens of classical Hollywood film music practices (Audissino 2021 [2014]), the latter analyzing how the popularity of Williams’s music was bolstered via its association with a franchise that targeted younger audiences (Webster 2009 and 2018). Building upon this foundational work, analytical articles have subsequently explored other aspects of Williams’s output as well, such as the representation of the American presidential myth in his scores and the evolution of his approach to action sequences in the 21st century (Lehman 2021 and 2015); in the same vein, a collective volume has been specifically devoted to Williams’s film, television, and instrumental compositions (Audissino 2018), and several new doctoral dissertations have also been completed in recent years (notably two in 2024—one by Power on the nationalist dimensions of Williams’s film scores, the other by Kmet on the role and impact of music editors in the digital era). French-language research specifically devoted to Williams has likewise been developing over the past fifteen years. This has focused in particular on the *Star Wars* saga, namely due to its enduring impact on popular culture and the franchise’s revival with the prequel trilogy launched by *The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) (Berthomieu 1996–2011; Guido 2006; Cathé 2007; Rossi 2011; Tylski 2011; Huvet 2016–2024).

- 3 The present issue of *Émergences* originates from an international conference held at Université Évry Paris-Saclay in December 2022, the results of which will appear in two complementary thematic issues of this journal in the course of 2025. Reflecting the latest developments in Williamsian studies, the aim, on the one hand, is to shed light on underexplored aspects of Williams’s work whilst on the other, to reconsider some of his works and their distinctive stylistic features through renewed approaches that offer fresh perspectives. This first, multidisciplinary volume brings together contributions from both emerging and established scholars in the fields of

musicology and film studies. Collectively, they examine questions relating to Williams's engagement with the past as well as the enduring legacy of his corpus, thereby moving beyond the divisive notions of plagiarism, paraphrase, and originality (Orosz 2015). The first four contributors explore how Williams draws from diverse musical traditions in order to enrich his own compositional practice. Among others, this entails borrowings, pastiches, references to Western art music and key figures in film music (such as James Bernard or Bernard Herrmann), or even self-referential gestures toward his earlier works in a nostalgic turn. In the final four articles, the focus is instead on defining and interrogating John Williams's legacy, particularly his aesthetic and stylistic influence on major intergalactic audiovisual epics in both American and French productions.

- 4 In the first section, "**Looking Toward the Past,**" Conor Power examines the final *Star Wars* trilogy, in which Williams reintroduces themes from the original trilogy to reinforce narrative continuity. These motifs, employed as "reminiscence motifs," allow audiences to relive emotions associated with the earlier films while simultaneously solidifying (sometimes artificially) the saga's musical identity. This use of historically situated connotations finds a parallel in Samantha Tripp's study. Focusing on the "Imperial March" motif and its borrowings from British musical traditions, most notably the works of Elgar and Holst, she demonstrates that this iconic theme links the Galactic Empire to the British colonial imaginary through its central role in the musical representation of power and authority. These references further strengthen the connection between music and political symbolism within the *Star Wars* universe. Finally, two case studies of late 1970s films, *Dracula* (John Badham, 1979) and *The Fury* (Brian De Palma, 1978), are respectively explored by Gilles Menegaldo and Grégoire Tosser. In *Dracula*, Williams revisits Gothic cinema conventions by crafting a score that blends lyrical romanticism with horror aesthetics. By highlighting sublime landscapes and the ambivalent interactions between Dracula and his victims, Williams reinvents the sonic codes associated with the vampire myth whilst remaining rooted in the cinematic tradition. In *The Fury*, by contrast, Williams's music foregrounds the legacy of Bernard Herrmann, incorporating both explicit and subtle allusions

to two Alfred Hitchcock films, *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960). Much like Brian De Palma, who drew inspiration from Hitchcock's cinema at the same time as revitalizing and modernizing its legacy, this deliberate influence reflects Williams's commitment to preserving the symphonic tradition while adapting it to the narrative demands of the psychological thriller.

- 5 In the next section, **“Williamsian Legacies, Intergalactic Epics, and Fantasy,”** [Lauren Crosby](#) examines the television series *The Mandalorian* (Disney+, 2019) and *The Book of Boba Fett* (Disney+, 2021), where Ludwig Göransson and Joseph Shirley manipulate Williams's leitmotifs to reflect character evolution and enrich non-linear narratives. This adaptation demonstrates how music is able to connect multiple temporalities and revitalize the *Star Wars* universe. [Matt Lawson](#) then highlights the challenges faced by new composers stepping into the *Star Wars* musical legacy, such as Michael Giacchino and John Powell for the spin-offs *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Ron Howard, 2018), or Ludwig Göransson, Natalie Holt, and Nicholas Britell for the Disney+ series (2019–2022). While moving away from the neo-Romantic style, these composers preserve key elements of the saga's musical identity, thereby helping to maintain an emotional connection with fans even in a context of innovation. This musical reinvention extends beyond official productions to amateur works, as [Jérémy Michot](#) demonstrates in his study of French *Harry Potter* fan films. Created using digital tools by young composers such as Thomas Kubler and Clément Ferrigno, both of whom were interviewed by the author, these productions embrace a DIY approach, appropriating the musico-narrative codes of Warner Bros's films. Going beyond mere homage, these works reveal a mastery of Williams's compositional techniques as well as an ability to adapt these to new narrative contexts. Fan films both expand and renew the *Harry Potter* universe, consequently proving that, through transmedia reflection and true sonic expertise, amateur productions are sometimes capable of rivalling professional works. Finally, [Cécile Carayol](#) examines how, in *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Luc Besson, 2017), Alexandre Desplat was able to contribute to the space opera genre by reinterpreting the musical conventions that Williams established. By combining neo-Hollywood techniques with his own style,

characterized by symphonic clarity, Desplat creates a score where archetypal themes pay tribute to Williams while developing a minimalist and modal approach. Through explicit references to *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), he enriches *Valerian's* musical universe while adapting to Luc Besson's distinctive visual aesthetic.

- 6 We would like to end by thanking the experts who contributed to this double issue's development and quality through their reviews and evaluations: Laura Anderson, Yannick Bellenger-Morvan, Marie-Hélène Benoît-Otis, Louise Bernard de Raymond, Nicole Biamonte, Muriel Boulan, Justine Breton, James Buhler, Céline Carencó, Sergi Casanelles, Nicole Cloarec, Pierre Couprie, Gérard Dastugue, Catherine Deutsch, Grace Edgar, Stéphan Etcharry, Rebecca Fülöp, Catherine Girodet, Anaïs Goudmand, Martin Guerpín, Laurent Guido, Philippe Gumplowicz, Solenn Hellégouarch, Kathryn Kalinak, Federico Lazzaro, Neil Lerner, James D. McGlynn, François de Médicis, Pierre Pascal, Luc Robène, David Roche, Ron Rodman, Ian Sapiro, Tim Summers, Inès Taillandier-Guittard, Joakim Tillman and Delphine Vincent.

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