

Concert 3

January 14, 2017

John Williams

While John Adams, Phillip Glass, John Corigliano, and a host of others vie for the mantle of Aaron Copland's successor, in point of fact, the average American has probably heard more music for symphonic orchestra by John Williams than all of the others put together. He stands alone in his position as the most successful and most admired film composer of the last thirty years or so. Over four-dozen Academy Award nominations (five won) and some twenty-two Grammy wins speak for themselves. His music is so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget just how much of it we know and experience. While there have been any number of film composers who have experimented in various styles of writing for films, it is he who is most responsible for the rebirth of the great symphonic film music style that had prevailed in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. Symphony orchestras perform his music on the concert stage simply because it was written for symphony orchestras—on Hollywood sound stages. His peripatetic musical talent is not confined to Hollywood, by any means, though. He spent the eighties as Arthur Fiedler's successor as conductor of the Boston Pops, and guest conducts almost everywhere. Also active as a composer of concert music, he has written over a dozen concertos for solo instruments and orchestra, as well as several chamber music works.

He was classically trained as a pianist, even having studied at the Juilliard School with the formidable Rosina Lhévinne, mentor of generations of top concert pianists. Subsequently, he soon joined the New York commercial scene as arranger, pianist, and composer before moving to Los Angeles. There he continued his career, making an early appearance as a composer with contributions to television series like "Gilligan's Island" and "Wagon Train" in the late 1950s. As his career developed, he began to write film scores by the dozens it seems--movies you know, but probably have forgotten about. You may remember: *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Cowboys*, and *The Towering Inferno*. Somewhat more recent films include: *War Horse* and *The Book Thief*. He is most renowned for the "Star Wars" films, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," and such, but his work has encompassed much more, including such compositions as the theme to the NBC nightly news. But there is no doubt that it is his association with the film directors George Lucas and Steven Spielberg--begun in the 1970s—that has produced his most notable scores.

His symphonic style owes much to the music of many great composers; Gustav Holst comes to mind—and he personally has singled out Edward Elgar. Other than a masterful technical prowess in orchestration, his success as a composer is surely his remarkable talent to imagine just the right music for an infinitude of human emotions—from the terror in the simple, two-note, shark motive in "Jaws" to the soaring spaceship music of "Star Wars." He scored almost every one of the "Harry Potter" films, and his adroit conjuration of the magic of those tales is just perfect in the minds of countless fans.

Oh, yes, remember Henry Mancini's sinister, low jazzy piano theme to "Peter Gunn?"—that was the young Williams, himself, at the piano. That tells it all.

My Name is Mitka—Jordan Roper

Jordan Roper—whose parents live in Cheyenne--is a young film composer at the beginning of his career, after having been graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho and

the Pacific Northwest Film Scoring Program in recent years. *My Name is Mitka* was inspired by the horrific experiences of Mitka Kalinski, who survived incredible privations and tribulations at the hands of the Nazis at the Pfaffenwald “medical experiment camp” during the Holocaust of World War II. The composer’s aunt, Luana Lish, has written a book detailing his tragic story, and it is soon to be published.

As a young boy, Mitka Kalinski was the only survivor of the camp, after all of the inmates were machined-gunned to death over an open trench and he miraculously was saved by feigning death. After having been recaptured, he was given as a slave to a high-ranking SS guard, and was not freed until four years after the war had ended. He knew little about himself— not even his own name—until he was matched with a photo on file at the Auschwitz death camp.

This short composition skillfully evokes the tragedy and hopelessness of not only Mitka, but clearly of all of those who suffered so grievously. Roper has chosen certain musical scales and chord progressions that evoke the Middle-European culture of those victims, weaving a keening violin solo above the orchestra. While the mood that Roper conjures is appropriately despairing, it gradually gives way to an optimism that is not uncommon among those who have faced trials and experiences that the rest of us find difficult to even imagine.

Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*—Leonard Bernstein

More than twenty-five years after Leonard Bernstein’s death, the critics are still arguing over the meaning and impact of his legacy. What is clear, however, is that the world rarely enjoys the genius of someone who excels supremely in so many artistic endeavors. Pianist, conductor, television personality, teacher, mentor, social gadfly, and composer of both popular musical theatre and “serious works,” Bernstein wore all hats with avidity. And he enjoyed stunning success in most. He had a passion about everything that he essayed, whether conducting the Mahler that he loved so well, or helping audiences “peel” apart the mysteries of music in his many teaching roles. He knew so much, and could do so much, that he genuinely thought that he could do it all. His leadership of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and other orchestras is legendary, but everyone knows there were some concerts that, frankly, got away from him in his self-indulgence. He worked assiduously as a composer of “serious” music, but those works—from youthful successes to his late efforts--have enjoyed mixed success. All that simply says is merely that he was human. Other than his epochal conducting, there is one field in which he garnered almost universal acclaim, and that is musical theatre. When all is said and done, he possessed a talent and a facility for the stage that was as deep as it was prolific. He well understood the genre and its demands.

He plunged in early, writing for student productions at Harvard, and working with a cabaret group (that included Judy Holiday) while a student at the Curtis Institute. At the age of twenty-six his ballet *Fancy Free* was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera and *On the Town* opened on Broadway. *Wonderful Town*, *Peter Pan*, *Facsimile*, *Candide*, and, of course, *West Side Story*, followed in succession. Later works, like his still-controversial multimedia theatre piece, *Mass* (1971), and the unsuccessful musical, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, some critics point to as evidence of a weakening sense of his audience and times. But his masterpiece is clearly *West Side Story*, and has stood the test of time as a document of the Big Apple in the fifties.

It’s a masterful blend of pop sociology, bebop and Latin jazz, and fantastic integration of dance. Bernstein had “big” ears for the jazz idiom—and came up with a score that rather better

makes the case for “symphonic jazz” than did ever Gershwin or Copland. He clearly had an innate feel for the dance and for jazz rhythms and harmonies to which few “legit” composers could ever aspire. The “Symphonic Dances” were gleaned from the score of the musical in 1960 and dedicated to that genius of orchestration who had collaborated on the original show, Sid Ramin. In it one will hear the familiar “Somewhere,” a mambo and a cha-cha, the ultra cool “Cool,” and the gripping “Rumble” music, as this synopsis of a time-shifted Romeo and Juliet reaches its inexorable tragic conclusion.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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