

The Music of John Williams

Saturday, October 6th, 2018

In 1954, a 22-year-old pianist named Johnny Williams arrived in New York City to begin study at the prestigious Juilliard School. Williams was fresh off a two-year stint in the Air Force, where he had been one of the primary composers and arrangers for the Air Force Band. Though he had spent his high school and early college years in Los Angeles, CA his arrival at Juilliard marked a return for Williams, who was born and raised in New York City. He had moved cross-country from NYC to LA at the age of sixteen because his father, a fellow performing musician also named Johnny Williams, had received numerous offers to record music for the burgeoning film industry. In fact, the elder Johnny Williams would go on to provide percussion for some of the most important film soundtracks of the early 1950s, including *On the Waterfront* and *From Here to Eternity*.

But unlike his father, who had studied architecture in school and only fallen into the new styles of “jazz” as a hobbyist initially, the young Johnny Williams wanted the best musical education American conservatories could offer. In his early twenties, Williams’s ultimate dream was the tour the world as a concert pianist, and a training at Juilliard would certainly afford him that opportunity. His piano teacher was to be Rosina Lhévinne, a fierce Russian émigré who had studied at the Moscow Conservatory with the likes of Sergei Rachmaninoff and Alexander Scriabin. And one of his closest classmates would be the young pianist Van Cliburn, who would be vaulted to worldwide fame just a few years later as the triumphant American taking First Prize at the inaugural Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. In a 2012 interview with NPR, Williams commented “I played pretty well, [but] I did hear players like John Browning and Van Cliburn around the place, who were also students of Rosina's, and I thought to myself, 'If that's the competition, I think I'd better be a composer!'”

Whether because of his lack of confidence or simply his expansive musical curiosity, Williams shortly found himself supplementing his rigorous conservatory training with another kind of musical gauntlet: playing in many of the same NYC jazz clubs that had hosted his father just a decade earlier. By 1958, Williams once again followed in his father’s footsteps and moved back across the country to begin work in the Los Angeles film industry. For several years, he worked primarily as a session player, providing piano to scores by renowned film composers like Henry Mancini, Bernard Herrmann, and Alfred Newman, but when offered the chance to write his first original film score in 1960, he never looked back. And the rest, as they say, is history. Over the last six decades, Williams has become one of the most dominant forces in American music. His music for film and television has earned him an astounding 24 Grammys, 7 Oscars, 4 Golden Globes, and 3 Emmys. In fact, his 51 Academy Award nominations are second only to Walt Disney. And outside of Hollywood, Williams has had a nearly 40-year relationship with the

Boston Symphony Orchestra, including nearly 15 years as conductor of the Boston Pops. Even at age 86, he has continued to work at a breakneck pace both in film and in the concert hall.

As you will hear in the sampling of his works presented by the FSO this evening, one of the defining characteristics of Williams's music is an undying devotion to the power of melody. Even in a context where his music is playing second fiddle (pun intended) to the pictures on the screen, the Williams's melodic ideas are robust and compelling enough to stand on their own. Perhaps no other composer in recent memory has produced so many melodies that can be sung on command by such a broad swath of the world population. His music is a classic example of what a former teacher of mine called "doggie bag music": music so rich and filling that patrons can't seem to avoid taking a portion home with them at the end of the evening. In fact, I won't be surprised if many of you find yourselves singing one or more of these iconic themes in the shower or the car at several points in the coming weeks.