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An odyssey of Hollywood movie music with the orchestra



By David Patrick Stearns
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For some audiences, the presence of a John Williams *Star Wars* suite on a Philadelphia Orchestra program suggests a diluted sense of musical purpose, and raises the question: Why pay money to hear music that's always in the air anyway?

But as contextualized Tuesday by guest conductor Grant Llewellyn at the Mann Center, the familiar anthems from one of the most popular films of all time became a near-inevitable conclusion to a musical odyssey from Vienna to Hollywood, with a pitstop in Stokowski-era Philadelphia. Though only 850 of the reserved seats were filled, the lawn had a population of 1,900, and if those were the *Star Wars* fans, they came away with far more than expected.

The Viennese composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold didn't create the deluxe Hollywood movie music sound so much as he transferred it from the Richard Strauss-influenced operatic manner of 1930s Central Europe. His plush scores earned him Oscars (for *Anthony Adverse* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*) - and were recycled into the 1945 *Violin Concerto* played Tuesday. Williams is an artistic descendant of Korngold with his grand orchestral gestures and boldly etched orchestrations. But the context showed great composers using similar means with diametrically opposed purposes.

At first, Williams seemed a bit one-dimensional. What you hear first time around is what's there. Unlike opera, though, music doesn't drive the totality, but is best when serving its needs as specifically as possible. And in light of the fantastical places depicted on screen in *Star Wars*, the music wisely doesn't attempt to characterize the extraterrestrial qualities, but goes far to connect the visual element with timeless archetypes.

That's one quality that makes the films more than adventure tales and that brings audiences back to them for multiple viewings. Williams' score is a feet-on-the-ground guide to what the films can mean and helps them from becoming obscure and cultish.

The suite itself reflects Williams' cunning as the accomplished classical composer that he is. With a rather large amount of music to select from, his suites have an unerring sense of sequencing. Events follow each other with great contrast yet with an ear for the overall sound world. In films, big themes often return in the same way, but in this concert suite, there was a sense of evolution from one appearance to the next.

Though Korngold wrote swashbuckling music as well as anybody (he scored *The Sea Hawk*), he didn't anchor his films, but brought an extra dimension to formulaic screen cliches (which are often worn-out archetypes). He gave emotional gravity, texture, and dramatic stature to the films and performances at hand - maybe even more than they deserved.

In the *Violin Concerto*, so much lies below the surface that the music is like a Viennese pastry - crack it open and delightful things ooze out. And could even the best Hollywood studio orchestras match what filled the Mann Center on Tuesday?

Llewellyn seemed to know the tiniest corners of this gorgeously layered score, though the star of the evening was violinist Lara St. John, who played with such identification that you could momentarily convince yourself she was making it up on the spot. Her tone quality in the violin's upper reaches was intimate, focused, and silky. Portamentos courted sentimentality, but felt so much at home, you wouldn't be without them.

Years ago, St. John made a Faustian bargain with the recording industry by presenting herself as a "babe violinist" and was, in some quarters, dismissed on sight rather than sound. Based on this performance, that was so wrong.



Stars of "Star Wars" are Mark Hamill (left), Carrie Fisher, and Harrison Ford. The film's music conveys timeless archetypes.

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Two smaller works on the program worked conceptually and were full of musical charm, first Johann Strauss' *Blue Danube* - always good to hear and, in this case, showing the world from which Korngold sprang - and Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue* as orchestrated by Stokowski and heard in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*.

After his oddly off-focused appearance with Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia in 2007, Llewellyn led performances full of dramatically attenuated endings and much ardent phrase stretching - all effective and appropriate.

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