



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Movies: "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial" In Concert

05/13/2017 01:24 am ET

E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL IN CONCERT *** 1/2 out of ****

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC AT LINCOLN CENTER

NOTE: This presentation of the film *E.T.* with a full orchestral accompaniment takes place twice on Saturday, May 13 at Lincoln Center and some tickets are still available.

In the beginning, every film was presented with live music. Of course, that was in the day of silent movies and the quality of the live music (maybe a piano or if you were lucky an organ) varied wildly and was improvised by the musician on-hand, someone who had their go-to melodies for chase scenes and love scenes and so on. Many things were lost when movies turned to sound but that slapdash accompaniment was not one of them. Sure at a great theater in a big city you might get a solid offering. But most people in most towns around the world heard a very poor substitute at best.

The ability to marry a film to a full orchestral score proved one of the many advantages of sound, one quickly realized by Hollywood as scores by Max Steiner (doing innovative work on the blockbuster *King Kong* in 1933) and others caught fire with audiences. Suddenly every moviegoer in every tiny hamlet around the world (people who'd never even had the chance to attend a symphony in their lives) was hearing lush, full-bodied original music of the highest quality. (Radio didn't really become affordable and widespread till after the war.)

Composers fleeing the storm clouds of Europe were getting commissions to write more music more quickly than ever before — and hearing them performed by musicians of world-class calibre. It wasn't like composing a symphony, of course, but by God it paid and the work was challenging and fulfilling for those who had the taste and skill.

Film music flourished for decades. Then with the rise of indie cinema and rock and roll, those old-fashioned film scores fell out of favor. *Easy Rider* became a phenomenon by dropping in pop songs in the middle of the action. Audiences didn't want scores and studios avoided them to a degree — if you wanted to reach the kids, you'd reach for a hit single, not some boring old symphony that appealed to their grandparents.

Then John Williams came along. His music for *Jaws* was iconic and riveting, cementing a relationship with

director Stephen Spielberg that would mark one of the most fruitful pairings of composer and director since Bernard Herrmann and Alfred Hitchcock. But it was *Star Wars* that brought the classic film score back into the popular consciousness for good. Its soundtrack sold like hot cakes — not as much as *Saturday Night Fever* but enough to make Hollywood sit up and pay notice.

Remarkably, John Williams composed the score for three different movies that took the crown for the highest grossing movie of all time one after the other — *Star Wars* and then *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and the far less interesting *Jurassic Park*. Toss in the *Indiana Jones* and *Harry Potter* franchises along with so many more and to most people John Williams *is* movie music. This Christmas apparently the new *Star Wars* film will mark his 101st full film score. What better time to revisit one of his best?

For most cinema buffs, if they go to hear a movie performed with live music, it's usually a silent film and the music is by a small group like the Alloy Orchestra doing an original score or maybe a talented improviser on piano or organ. Such events are a treat. But hearing a full orchestra play a classic Hollywood score is a whole new ballgame. The combination of being in the room with that music while seeing a brilliant classic projected on screen is a rare one-two punch. The New York Philharmonic has been doing this for years now, sometimes embracing artier fare like *Koyaanisqatsi* or classic Hollywood. It's always an event.

The challenge for the musicians is unique for them, I think. Typically a conductor has a particular vision for performing, say, Beethoven's Ninth. That can't happen with a film score, since the music must be married precisely with the action on screen for any of it to make sense. They also face the challenge of playing

continuously for much longer than usual, which is why this performance of the score of *E.T.* included an intermission at a well chosen spot. In essence, it's like recording the score for a film all in one take. I've no idea if this makes conducting movie music and performing it for an audience more difficult or more boring than the usual classical fare. I do know audiences eat it up and musicians that are used to polite applause at the end of a 40 minute work must get a certain charge out of hearing audiences well up with excitement throughout a performance.

That certainly was the case with Friday night's performance of *E.T.* (It's also being performed twice on Saturday.) Spielberg's classic is a bedtime story and the music by Williams is gently majestic throughout. Conductor David Newman (of the acclaimed composing family and let's pray he gets to score a sequel to *Serenity* one day) led the orchestra with precision and style throughout. The film just sweeps one up but with the music performed live you are more aware than usual of the crucial role played by the music.

Williams immediately sets a tone of wide-eyed wonder, leaning heavily on woodwinds and touches of harp and celeste (delivered here on piano). While mystery and the unknown are recognized and respected, he doesn't cheat us by signaling danger. The music might be tantalizing and wary as Elliot waits for and finally meets the alien creature, but at some primal level it tells us: don't be scared. The only real sense of fear comes when we're knocked back into our seats by pounding percussion, music that startles us into alertness when human adults appear on screen in full view (practically for the first time), marching up a suburban street to entrap our hero.

I mentioned *King Kong* earlier and that 1933 film remains far superior to all the remakes and spin-offs. Yes, its stop-motion animation has been supplanted by far more flexible digital effects. But that human touch (the hands that must manipulate the actual figurine step by step for each frame of action) gives the creature its quirky life. And the score pumps blood into what we see as well, making us accept it without question.

Similarly, the low-budget *E.T.* may have special effects that now seem a little obvious. E.T. moves so slowly and awkwardly when asked to do so that we smile a little at the sight. Even a kid today can probably spot the blue screen that is used when E.T. and Elliot are on a bike and suddenly they lift up into the sky. Does it matter? Not in the least. The stirring musical cue of Williams lifts us up into the night sky as well and we *believe* they can fly, whatever our eyes may momentarily say about how it's done.

That's why no film is great because of its special effects. (Indeed, that's why *Jurassic Park* is pretty much a bore today while *Jaws* remains a classic. One was wholly dependent on special effects for the thrill ride fun of believing dinosaurs were once again roaming the earth. The other one tells a *story* and the fact that the shark was a big rubber puppet that rarely worked well doesn't matter in the least.) Special effects can seem antique in the blink of an eye. But a scene on the moon is no more or less real than a scene in a kitchen. It's all make believe. When you have great actors and great dialogue and great cinematography and great editing and a great score, the spell will be cast.

So what a treat to see this film performed by the New York Philharmonic for a live audience almost rapturous

with pleasure. They eagerly applauded the beginning of the film and the name of Spielberg and Williams when they appeared in the opening credits. They laughed and smiled throughout. At that memorable moment when the bicycle does take flight and crosses the moon, they burst into unrestrained applause.

During the intermission, Newman mentioned one of the actors in the film was present and the ripple of excitement was palpable. It turned out to be New Yorker Robert MacNaughton, who played Elliot's older brother Michael quite well. He stood and briefly waved to the crowd, even taking a quick picture while they applauded like a rock star was in the house. In the second half, they good-naturedly cheered his first screen appearance and applauded again when MacNaughton sprang into action at the finale. If I were him, I doubt I could resist coming back for every other showing. So why only three and a half stars instead of four? No popcorn! It just feels wrong.

If you're not in New York this weekend, you might plan a visit for the fall. The New York Philharmonic is doing a Star Wars Film Concert Series from September 15 through October 7, including the entire original trilogy and the 2015 sequel *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. If Mark Hamill shows up, I'd fear for his life.

REGISTER TO VOTE!!

It's easy, it's fun, it's empowering.

Here's a nonpartisan site that will allow you to easily access your state's voter registration site.

Are you in New York? You can register online right here.

If you don't register and vote, you don't get to complain.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.