



Michael Giltz, Contributor [BookFilter](#) creator

New York Philharmonic Tackles "The Empire Strikes Back"

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STAR WARS FILM CONCERT SERIES

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: SPECIAL EDITION *** 1/2 out of ****

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC AT LINCOLN CENTER/DAVID GEFFEN HALL

"I'm just getting warmed up," was Al Pacino's memorable boast in the not-very-good Oscar-winning film *Scent Of A Woman*. That surely must have been the feeling of the New York Philharmonic after their live performances of the complete score to *Star Wars* accompanying a screening of the film. You can read my review here, which doesn't amount to much more than slack-jawed pleasure. The score by John Williams is one of the most famous and influential works in movie history and they did it full justice. I wondered what the biggest adjustment for them would be when tackling a film score like this: the unrelenting demand of staying strictly at a predetermined pace, performing a single piece for two hours (not counting a brief intermission) or keeping focus as the audience bursts into applause for the logo of 20th Century Fox, the thunderous burst of noise that announces the title card STAR WARS, the entrance applause for every major character and most gratifyingly in this context the entrance applause for famous musical cues from the film.

Well, you can double down on all those issues for *The Empire Strikes Back*. (And the geeks among you will recognize my geekiness in refusing to rebrand this film as *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, not to mention my word of warning that they are screening a print of the dreaded Special Edition, which isn't as egregious as the Special Edition of *Star Wars*, but still....) The treat of seeing these two films almost back to back with a live performance of the score was to appreciate anew how Williams built upon and expanded the first film's score. I was enjoying myself too much to scribble down notes, but scene after scene was powered by the music to a remarkable degree. Like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, this film is modeled on serials, those weekly shorts that always ended with a cliffhanger. So *The Empire Strikes Back* film really *moves* and the score never catches its breath. Every time I glanced down from the movie and looked at the orchestra, conductor David Newman was wiping his brow.

If you're in New York City or will be soon, the New York Philharmonic is performing the scores to a screening

of Return Of The Jedi on October 4 and 5th and Star Wars: The Force Awakens on October 6 and 7th.

My guest thought the brass section in particular should have been on an elevated platform and in the spotlight. They do yeoman's work on this film, which is wall to wall action. *Star Wars* has moments of quiet contemplation, a slow build to the dramatic climax as our hero journeys from a small town to the front lines of battle. *Return Of The Jedi* has a more playful, family friendly atmosphere, with the action broken by comedy and romance and a joyful finale. But *The Empire Strikes Back*? It begins with an attack on a rebel base, moves into space and a treacherous asteroid belt, zooms to a cloud city and on and on with not a moment to catch your breath. And every moment seems punctuated by the brass.

More than ever, I appreciated here the cue written for the romantic sparks between Princess Leia and that scoundrel Han Solo. How subtly and smartly it allows us to have fun and yet points the audience in the right direction. The music of Williams makes clear the attraction between those two to be inevitable — we don't quite know how, but the competition between Han and Luke is immediately over, even if Luke doesn't realize it at first. So the icky realization in *Return Of The Jedi* that Luke and Leia are siblings (spoiler alert!) is foreshadowed here and softened quite neatly. Williams is letting us know that Luke and Leia might care for each other but its Han that has her heart.

Yoda is of course a highlight of the film, as is the eerie cue that Williams created for the Jedi master and his use of the Force. This presentation includes subtitles since a live orchestra can't modulate its volume enough to make every stray bit of dialogue legible. That allows you to focus on the music while still enjoying the film.

But it also allows you to appreciate the other elements of the movie-making as well. Yoda was surely state of the art puppetry, but one can't help thinking of this practical effect as old-fashioned. He is so alive and so convincing here, far more so than the all-digital, flying Yoda of the three prequels. In this setting, I savored every moment of his performance, while enjoying the applause several of his iconic lines received from the audience. We all know how so many elements of these movies were groundbreaking, from the score of Williams to the brilliant production design of Norman Reynolds et al (a sci-fi movie that looks lived-in!) to the great screenplay by pioneering sci-fi writer Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan. But how about the cinematography of Peter Suschitzky! And the art direction and lighting and editing, which all come together so beautifully when Luke Skywalker races off to save his friends and Yoda is half in shadow but a light flashes across his face as he looks up to the sky and says quietly, "There is another." That's just one of many special moments this performance of the film and its score gave me.

But one cue above all hits you like a thunderbolt. It's so iconic, so memorable, you'd swear it was in *Star Wars* too. But "Imperial March" — you know, "dum dum da dum, dum da dum dum da dum" — makes its debut in *The Empire Strikes Back*. It sent a ripple of delight through the audience last night and received entrance AND exit applause after the cue's first appearance in the film.

As a kid, I always stayed to the end of the credits when I saw a movie. I would look for the weird job descriptions (gaffer, best boy) and cheer whoever they were. Besides, it was your only chance to see a lot of these names and even now it's often your only chance to see the credits for songs used in a film. Still, thanks to IMDB and the fact that every movie will be available on DVD so you can study the credits at your leisure, I often bolt for the door. Not tonight, not when the New York Philharmonic was coming to the end of the evening's marathon and still playing with passion and precision, at least as far as I could tell over the applause.

Michael Giltz was the second film score critic for Premiere magazine, following Donald Fagen of Steely Dan. Michael Giltz is also the founder and CEO of the 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.