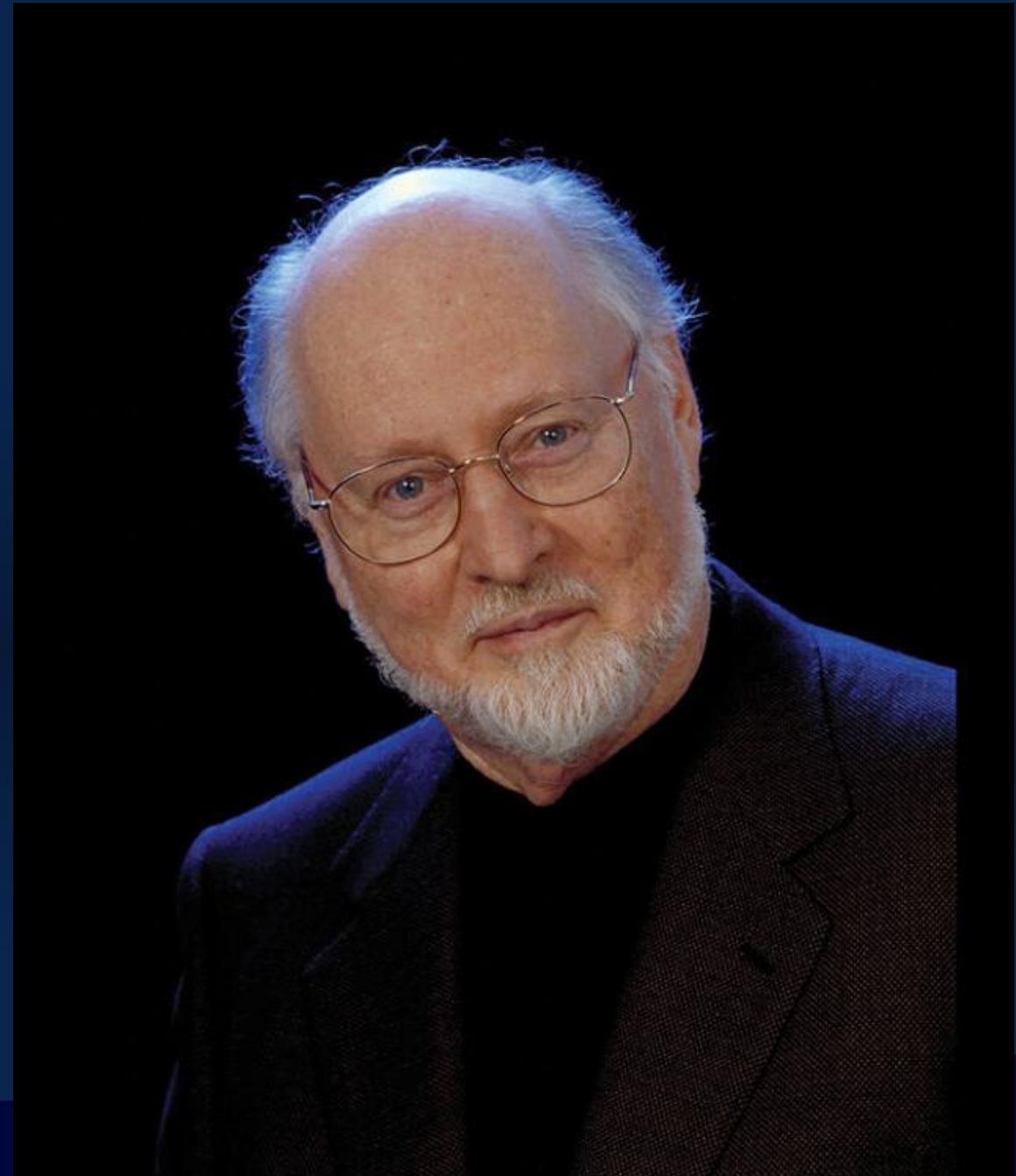


“THE SOUNDTRACK OF OUR LIVES”:
JOHN WILLIAMS AND THE
REVITALIZATION OF CLASSICAL
ORCHESTRATION IN FILM SCORES



Masterfully building off the musical foundations of Richard Wagner, Max Steiner, and others, John Williams successfully reintroduced the use of the leitmotif and revitalized the sound of the Golden Era of classical Hollywood film scores.

Not restricted to a single genre, his influence can be seen across film categories. His scores for *Star Wars* (1977) *Superman* (1978), and *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) encapsulate Williams' musical genius as well as the incredible impact his music has on both the films and the viewing audience.



Hired as a pianist for the orchestra at
Columbia Pictures

His skill on the piano can be heard in *South Pacific* (1958), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), *West Side Story* (1961), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

Late 1950s, began with him composing music for various TV shows of the 1960s: *Checkmate* (1960-1962), *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1965), and *Lost in Space* (1965)

Transitioned from TV scores to movie soundtracks in the mid-1960s

The Killers (1964)

None But the Brave (1965)

The Rare Breed (1966)

More serious film genres in the 1970s

The Poseidon Adventure (1972)

The Towering Inferno (1974)

Captured much attention with his score for *The Cowboys* (1972)



Figure 2."John Williams and Steven Spielberg." *The John Williams Collection*. <http://www.jw-collection.de/bio.htm>





Figure 3 Franz Hanfstaengl. "Wagner 1871."
<http://www.sr.se/p2/opera/op030419.stm>

Richard Wagner
(1813-1883)



Figure 4 "Max Steiner." *Internet Movie Database*.
<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000070/>

Max Steiner
(1888-1971)



Figure 5 "Erich Wolfgang Korngold." *International Erich W. Korngold Society*. <http://www.korngold.com/>

Erich W. Korngold
(1897-1957)



The Leitmotif

A leitmotif is “some sort of musical idea—a motive, a thematic melody, a particular harmony, or a harmonic progression—that represents a person, a thing, or even an idea.”

-Robert Greenburg

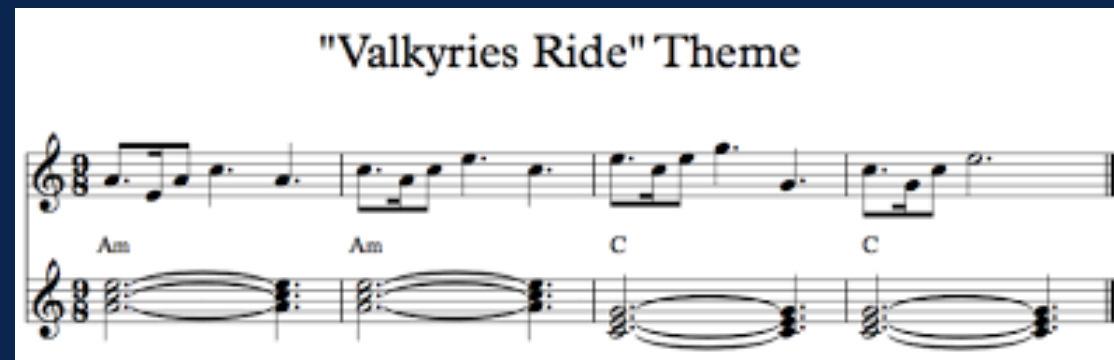


Figure 6 “Valkyries Ride Theme.” BBC Get Creative with Classical Music <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/learning>.



Figure 7 “Kong Motif (1933).” *David Allen Composer*.
<https://davidallencomposer.com/blog/king-kong-max-steiner-james-newton-howard-comparison>.



Star Wars (1977)

Lucas met Williams in April 1975.

“I thought the film would give me the opportunity to write an old-fashioned swashbuckling symphonic score, so that’s what I did.”

The movie harkened back to the westerns and adventure films of the 1930s that Eric Korngold scored.

“the films themselves showed us characters we hadn’t seen before and planets unimagined...but the music was... emotionally familiar... music that would put us in touch with very familiar and remembered emotions, which for me as a musician translated into the use of a 19th-century operatic idiom... These sorts of influences would put us in touch with remembered theatrical experiences.”



Figure 8 “Original *Star Wars* Poster, 1977” *Star Wars* <https://www.starwars.com/news/7-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-original-star-wars-poster>





ALEXANDER SALKIND PRESENTS MARLON BRANDO • GENE HACKMAN IN A RICHARD DONNER FILM
SUPERMAN

STARRING ALSO STARRING
CHRISTOPHER REEVE • NED BEATTY • JACKIE COOPER • GLENN FORD • TREVOR HOWARD • MARGOT KIDDER
VALERIE PERRINE • MARIA SCHELL • TERENCE STAMP • PHYLLIS THAXTER • SUSANNAH YORK
STORY BY MARIO PUZO • SCREENPLAY BY MARIO PUZO, DAVID NEWMAN, LESLIE NEWMAN AND ROBERT BENTON
CREATIVE CONSULTANT TOM MANKIEWICZ • DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY GEOFFREY UNSWORTH B.S.C.
PRODUCTION DESIGNER JOHN BARRY • MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS • DIRECTED BY RICHARD DONNER
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ILYA SALKIND • PRODUCED BY PIERRE SPENGLER • PANAVISION® TECHNICOLOR®
AN ALEXANDER AND ILYA SALKIND PRODUCTION

RELEASED BY WARNER BROS. A WARNER COMMUNICATIONS COMPANY TM & © DC Comics Inc. 1978



ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE ON WARNER BROS. RECORDS AND TAPES

WARNER SUPERMAN BOOKS AT BOOKSTORES AND NEWSSTANDS



SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

Superman (1978)

Williams tried to strike a balance between the theatrical elements and the campy nature of the film.

“I tried to have the music be structured in such a way that it be heroic, and big, and operatic but not take itself seriously.”

Main Hero/Superman's Theme

Villain's March, inspired by Richard Strauss and Sergei Prokofiev

Figure 9 “Original Superman Poster.” Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078346/>.



Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)

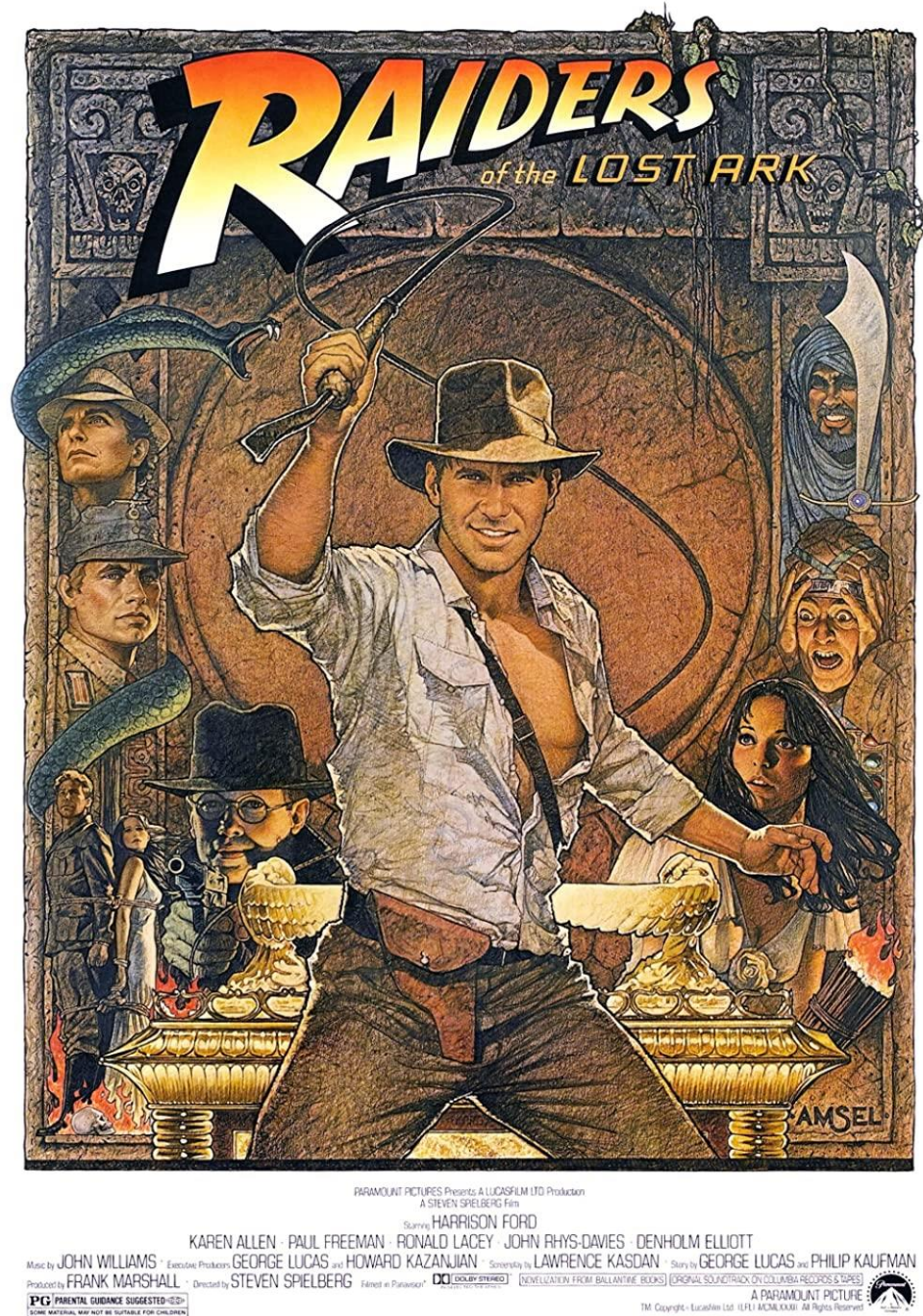
The movie's opening sequence starkly contrasts the opening scores for *Star Wars* and *Superman*.

The uneasiness created by the music does not subside until well into the movie, and Williams' brilliant use of mickey-mousing and tension-building musical techniques helped create one of the most iconic film openings of all time.

As the movie progresses, a more typical John Williams score emerges with the complex interweaving of many themes.



Figure 10 "Original Indiana Jones Poster." Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082971/>



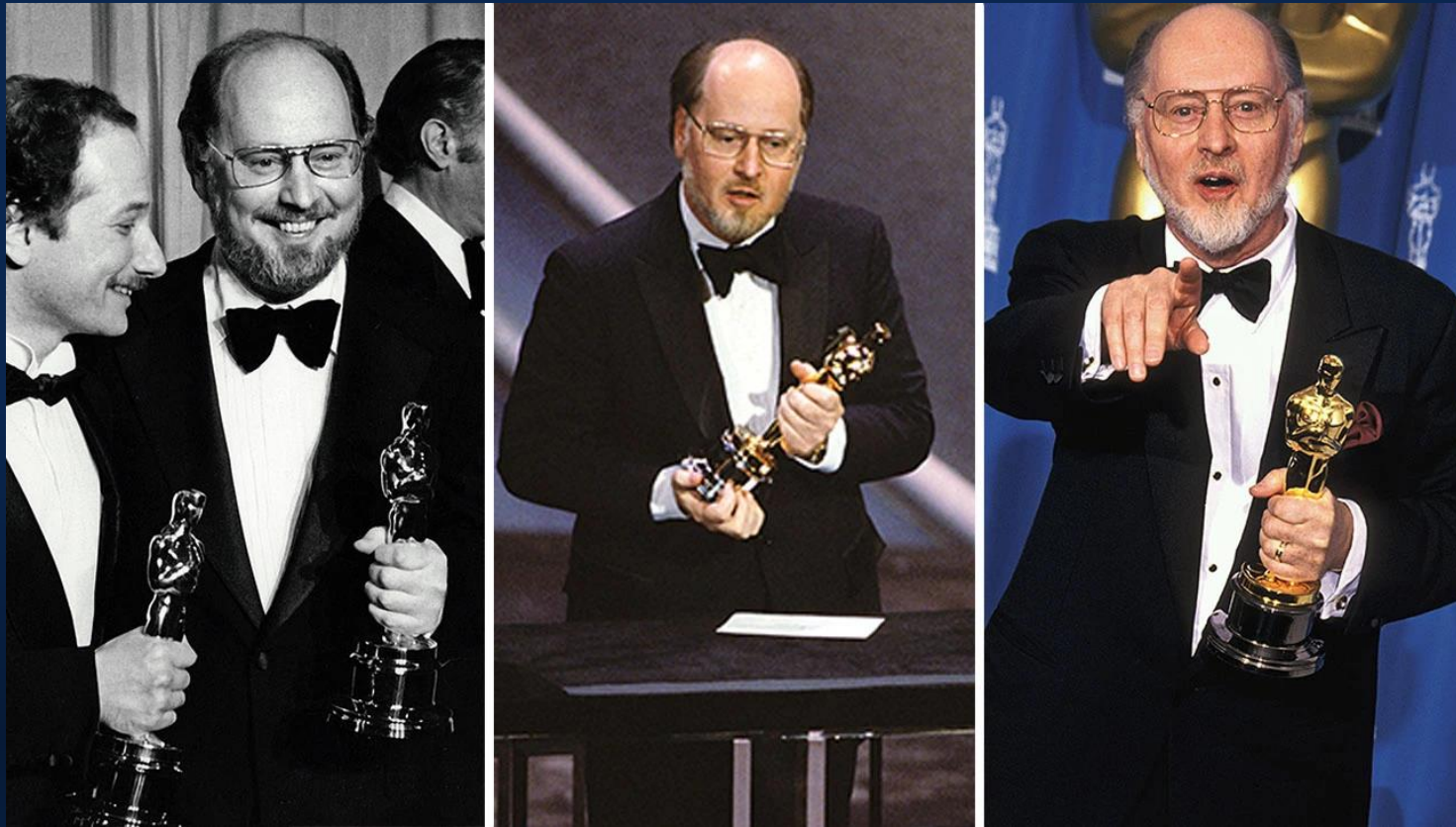


Figure 11 "Steven Spielberg and Fellow Directors Reveal the Stories Behind John Williams' Iconic Scores." *The Hollywood Reporter*.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/steven-spielberg-fellow-directors-reveal-900829/>

Williams' Incredible Impact

With his music being played not only in films but also in concerts, John Williams has left an indelible mark on the landscape of American pop culture.

Composing the music for over seventy-five movies, Williams has, in many ways, "created the soundtrack of our lives."



Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Byrd Craig L." The *Star Wars* Interview: John Williams." *Film Score Monthly* (January/February 1997). 18-21.

Dyer, Richard. "John Williams: New Horizons, Familiar Galaxies," *Boston Globe*, June 4, 1997.

_____. "Q &A with John Williams: Pops Conductor Talks about His New Beat." *Boston Globe*, 27 April 1980.

Indiana Jones. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Lucasfilm, 1981.

National Public Radio, "John Williams' Inevitable Themes interview with Jeff Lunden." November 10, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2012/11/10/164615420/john-williams-inevitable-themes>.

_____. "Williams, John and Anne-Sophie Mutter: Two Geniuses for the Price of One." August 24, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/24/753877978/john-williams-and-anne-sophie-mutter-2-geniuses-for-the-price-of-one>.

_____. "Williams, John interview with Bob Edwards." March 1, 2002. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1139161>.

Ross, Alex. "The Force is Still Strong with John Williams." *The New Yorker* <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-force-is-still-strong-with-john-williams>.

Shore, Howard. "A Conversation with Paul Chihara." *Music and the Moving Image*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 3-18.

_____. "For Stage and Screen: A Conversation with Paul Chihara." *Music and the Moving Image*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 2021),

"Spielberg and Lucas on Williams: Directors Reminisce about Collaborating with Hollywood's Greatest Composer." Film Music Society, 8 February 2012.

http://www.filmmusicsociety.org/news_events/features/2012/020812.html.

Schreiber Myrl and Max Steiner, "On Gone with the Wind, Selznick, and the Art of Mickey Mousing: An Interview with Max Steiner," *Journal of Film and Video* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 41.

Star Wars. Directed by George Lucas. 20th Century Fox, 1977.

Superman. Directed by Richard Donner. Warner Brothers, 1978.

Sullivan, Jack. "Conversations With John Williams." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 53, no. 19 (January 2007), 12-17.

The Music of Indiana Jones, video documentary by Laurent Bouzereau, Lucasfilm, 2003.

Wagner, Richard. *Pilgrimage to Beethoven and other Essays*. Translated by W. Ashton Ellis. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

_____. "On the Application of Music to the Drama," *Bayreuther Blatter* (November 1879), 175-191.

White, Fred. "What it was really like to see Star Wars in 1977?"

Looper YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSaLGHklyr0&t=438s>.

Williams, John quoted in Tim Greiving, "John Williams on The Force Awakens and the Legacy of Star Wars," Projector and Orchestra, January 5, 2016. <http://projectorandorchestra.com/john-williams-on-the-force-awakens-and-the-legacy-of-star-wars/>.

_____. "Superman: Making the Score," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-3u5OLfnYw>.

Wright, Ronald. Interviewed by Stephanie Wright, Forest, VA, April 30, 2022.



Bibliography

Secondary Sources:

Audissino, Emilio. *The Film Music of John Williams: Reviving Hollywood's Classical Style* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021).

Bribitzer-Stull, Matthew. *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Music*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Colburn, Michael. "John Williams Returns to Bands where He began 50 Years Ago," *Instrumentalists* (June 2004), 11-16.

Coleman Lindsay and John Tillman ed. *Contemporary Film Music: Investigating Cinema Narratives and Composition*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

Freer, Ian. *The Complete Spielberg*. London, UK: Virgin Books, 2001.

Greenberg, Robert. *How to Listen to Great Music: A Guide to Its History, Culture, and Heart*. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2011.

Gilmartin, Aaron. "Know the Score: Anatomy of a Great Film Score- 'King Kong,'" Film Independent. <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/know-the-score-anatomy-of-a-great-film-score-king-kong/>.

Hemming, Roy. *Discovering Great Music: A New Listener's Guide to the Top Classical Composers and Their Masterworks*. New York: New Market Press, 1992.

Meyer, Stephen. "'Leitmotif:' On the Application of a Word to Film Music." *Journal of Film Music* Vol. 5 No. 1-2 (2012) 101-108.

Jacobs, Jessie. "John Williams at 90: Creating the Soundtrack to Our Lives." Colorado Public Radio. <https://www.cpr.org/2022/02/04/john-williams-at-90-creating-the-soundtrack-to-our-lives/>.

Keyser, Les. *Hollywood in the Seventies*. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1981.

Paris, Olajide. "The Fi Hall of Fame: A Brief History of Film Music." Film Independent. <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/know-score-brief-history-film-music/>.

Rinzler J. W. *The Making of Star Wars: The Definitive Story Behind the Original Film*. New York: Del Rey Books, 2007.

Seidl, Anton. "Wagner's Influence on Present-Day Composers," *The North American Review*, Vol. 158, No 446 (January 1894), 86-93.

Tan, Siu -Lan. "The Psychology of Film Music," Music and the Moving Image Keynote Address 2015 published in the *Music and the Moving Image* vol. 9, no 2 (Summer 2016) 23-38.

