INTERVIEW with JOHN WILLIAMS

Irwin Bazelon: In the context of defining a composer as a person who knows how to put a piece together and understanding the structure of films and the nature of the music written for them, do you think one has to be a composer to write film music?

John Williams: No. Not in the sense I think you and I would define the term "composer." I think one could take a primitive with pie tins and bows and arrows and good recording equipment and make a wonderfully effective sound compilation of a mélange of noises. It might be very effective dramatically if it was timed correctly, if it suited the style of the film; if all these things seemed wedded to the grain or fabric of the film, I think it could be wonderful. Some people say this is composing, this is a composer—it may be, I don't know. But not in the kind of European, eighteenth-, nineteenth-, early twentieth-century sense of the word "composer" and the skills which that would designate.

IB: In other words, there are people who have learned to manipulate sounds, even though you and I know that sounds don't always make music.

JW: Some people have wonderful senses of aural design—sometimes better than composers, better than highly crafted and trained and skilled composers. There are some working in films very effectively. I think Quincy Jones is a wonderfully gifted man who has in his best work demonstrated a very keen ear. Perhaps not so much for composition in the academic or legitimate or serious sense, but composition in the sense of putting aural effects and images and noises together that make dramatic sense. I think Quincy's a good example of that breed of musician.

IB: Did you always want to write film music or did you have other musical ambitions or did you just stumble into the medium?

JW: I stumbled into films. The first compositions I did as a kid—I was a music student, a piano major and composition was second—but I wrote a piano sonata at the age of nineteen—you know, this kind of thing.

IB: Where did you study?

JW: UCLA here, later at Julliard. But in those years always mainly with piano in mind, and I did some writing, but I never dreamed I would write for films; I was thinking in terms of a piano career. I was a pretty good jazz pianist as a kid, and because of that I was able to get easily available jobs and recording-session work, sort of gigging around in New York. And when I came back to California because my family was here and the film business was here, and I was a fairly good sight-reading and jobbing pianist, I found myself working in film-studio orchestras. So I was exposed to it really through piano. I was playing piano for a lot of composers—you were one of them; Jerry Goldsmith was another. Earlier on, Alfred Newman was one of the composers I played for, one of the ones who impressed me the most. He was a genuine conductor, an interpreter of music; he brought things to other people's scores that the composers themselves didn't seem to be able to. He seemed, of that older generation, the best interpreter of the lot. From the piano vantage point, I became interested in this business of writing for films, and because of my entré into studios, because of my early piano abilities, one thing followed another.

IB: Do you believe that film music must necessarily mirror the pop culture of its time or what's currently the popular dance-music style? Do you think there's a natural tendency for the music of the pop culture to infiltrate into the films?

JW: I think there is a natural tendency for that to happen. After all, films, cinema, is a popular art; not totally, but in the main it is, commercially speaking. I admit that with some unhappiness. I mean, I think it is the opera of the twentieth century. It's what Meyerbeer and Bizet—whatever they were to popular upper-middle-class entertainment in France in the nineteenth century, so films are in this century to a segment of the population. But the promise that film music held out when sound in films developed has not been fulfilled. The greatest composers of music in the last forty years have not turned their attention to film. Many of the pop artists have achieved some very good results. But part of my own unhappiness about the development in film is that it is, to such a large extent, a pop-entertainment medium.

IB: How do you feel about the title-song mania and the current influx into the film scene of record companies paying music-production costs and creating hit records?

JW: Well, it has been overdone. God knows, it's a practice that I've been involved in on a few occasions myself. Not very happily, ever; some people seem to have a better touch at that than I do. Again, there I have mixed emotions. It's a practice that can be vile, obnoxious, and awful—very often. On the other hand, the commercial part of me says something has to do some business, and the music-selling business is not altogether a bad thing. It makes me think of Columbia Records; so many of their pop artists keep the masterwork catalogue going. You know, in the musical community there is a little bit of tit for tat. (I wish there were more tat for all the tit.) The broadest base in music publication, in music exploitation, does all of us composers some good. The idea of music earning money, whether it's yours or Stravinsky's or mine or a pop composer's or a troubadour's off the street with a guitar who doesn't know a C from a G—the idea of some of that music selling and accruing revenue and creating a broad base for the publishing industry is a healthy thing. So on the positive side of it, this business of title song and popular success from film music is both a good thing and a bad thing. It isn't a great thing for the art of music, vis-à-vis film scoring. But it does help the sort of general health of the music-publishing, revenue-creating areas of the music business—and the music "business" affects us all.

IB: Why do you think that so few contemporary concert composers in America are invited to score mainstream feature films? Do you think there is a commercial-mindedness that influences film people to avoid these composers?

JW: I think at the base of this thing is the fact that the American film industry is different in its character from the Russian, German, Italian, etc. Part of it has to do with language itself: the English language is the Esperanto of the present time. American film producers have always had the largest audience. An Englishman would say, "Why do you have so many millions for your film and I only have pittance; what is this American wealth in films?" It has to do with the number of theaters, the numbers of bodies coming to the theaters.

It's changing over the years. We could go back to the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers days—it was a commercial, popular entertainment medium, and commercial to a far greater extent than it ever was in France, than it ever could be in Italy, than it ever could conceivably be in Russia—and therefore, the whole sort of aesthetic tone of film-making was on a broader point on the bell curve, at a broader base aesthetically, and therefore, in some sense, a lower aesthetic base, closer to the common aesthetic ideal. I don't like to use the word "lower," because I believe in democracy in the arts, but let me put it this way—closer to a popular base—and the result has been that we've had more popular composers—Cole Porter writing for films. Not only songwriters; composers: people like Alfred Newman who came out of the theater—popular American music—and Max Steiner the same way; Franz Waxman was something of a jazz musician. I think this has something to do with it. I also think it has something to do with the American suspicion of serious-mindedness and high-mindedness. Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, Schoenberg, Stravinsky—these people came to California. But the interesting thing I noticed in Thomas Mann's letters was the great excitement when he got to California. It looked like the Côte d'Azur to him when he got here—and the great, naive excitement of movie-making, you know. And his great disappointment after the war—the McCarthy era—how it drove him back to Switzerland, and in his wonderfully articulate and aristocratic way, he described his disenchantment with the American sensibility. The director who was arty was suspect. Not only were his politics suspect, but his box-office magnetism was suspect.

IB: But don't you think it also has to do with the composers themselves; they're not willing to go out and meet some of these people and express an interest?

JW: Well, I think a lot of the finest musical minds in the country have concluded, "Well, Hollywood film music—that's simply kitsch—I'm not going to lower my standards and get involved in that," rather than take the positive attitude and say, "This is a great challenge in the twentieth century; this is the real art medium in the twentieth century; this is where I can really contribute something."

IB: You're quite right.

JW: And now we're coming to an era where, in serious music as well—you were talking about avant-garde and serious music growing closer to pop (in the younger generation), to noise music, electronics, and mixed-media kind of idioms of expression that suddenly become visual. Well, musicians are talking about audio-visual correspondence having nothing to do with pure visuals in the entertainment sense, in the movie sense, so there may be some hope that the Maxwell Davies of the world (he has a wonderful theatrical flair in his music anyway and probably could direct a fine film) suddenly seem to be saying to all of us, "Hey, I can take this seriously even if it's on the level of parody," which I think in Max's case it is; only until now I don't think he's really come face to face with the problem.

IB: I'm a great believer in writing your own sounds, even though we all know there are dramatic functions involved in films, and not every film has the excitement of another. Some are very prosaic and don't call for it.

JW: Right. Some films, on that point, seem to demand tonality.

IB: Sure. The other extreme would be out of place. But you still believe that pop songwriters and pop-music talent in today's scene have an edge in getting composing assignments over other types of composers?

JW: I think quantitatively they do, yes. I think more Hollywood producers, maybe London producers as well, would tend to say, "I want a pop-type noise for this picture," or "I want an exploitation song and a pop score." He's less likely to say, "I want Max Davies; I want Bud Bazelon." There are fewer things the producer probably feels that you can do or Max can do, you know.

IB: A special kind of film.

JW: That's right. And they're rare; they're very rare.

IB: I know you're a pianist, but I'm curious about your working habits. Do you use a piano to work out your ideas?

JW: Yes, I do use the piano—not all that much.

IB: Do you like to improvise a scene in the beginning, to sort of feel your way through it as far as style and form are concerned?

JW: Every score I find is different. To use an example of a kind of score where I don't use a piano—except in the rarest kind of instances where I'm writing a six-percussion kind of affair, a piano isn't very much help anyway; whereas other, more romantic things are very pianistic, and I find myself playing whole two- and three-minute sequences as almost romantic piano nocturnes, writing them down in that fashion and then scoring from that. So I think the answer would be, depending on the kind of music it is, my own habits would include a lot of piano or very little, but never none.

IB: Do you ever write music between assignments other than film scores?

JW: Yes, I do. Writing music is a pleasurable (so far) experience for me, and what little time I have, I do spend working on pieces.

IB: What percentage of directors and producers that you've worked for over the years know anything about music or even how to communicate on a simple dramatic level with a composer? How would you judge their overall musicality?

JW: My experience varies. I have worked for one or two who were terrifically well informed on music, and some were better musicologists than I am, but that's very rare. That might represent maybe five or ten percent. I'm thinking on a scale of maybe fifty people that I have worked with; I can think of two who are really quite knowledgeable.

IB: When I say simple level, nobody expects them to be musicians or to write our notes, even though I bet you find most of them think they know their business and yours.

JW: Yes, there is a lot of that. The old musician's joke, "Everybody's a musician when it comes to scoring

films." And that's true, you do run into a lot of that. I feel this about directors: the best directors are musical; I think part of what they do is musical. The art of editing film in my mind is a musical art. I find sometimes when I work with editors it's a thing of —one finds a cut in the same way that you prepare an orchestra, or you breathe with them, or it's a quicker tactic (your lungs diving into cold water). And directors who are good with actors and good with editors I find in general are musical. My complaint about them is that they listen to a fairly narrow range of music. Most of them don't have very broad tastes where music is concerned, so their picture may require a kind of music (or I may think it requires a kind of music) with which they are totally unfamiliar, and there's some education necessary there, and that's always dangerous. You're trampling on egos right away. But I think the better they are, the more musical they are. Once in a while, there's an Eisenstein, you know, an immensely cultured man who knows music—maybe he plays chamber music or something.

IB: Can you name one director?

JW: I can name Delbert Mann—he's very knowledgeable in music. Another one is George Roy Hill, who plays Bach on the piano and knows music. Another one is Mark Rydell, who's something of a pianist and knows music, and he's very musical. So perhaps I'm a bit kinder to the directors in that respect. I think the central thing here is musicality, and I think musicality has to do with everything in theater, everything in dance, everything in all of these arts. I think at the base of the whole thing is rhythm. Rhythm is the key to intonation, the key to vibrato, etc.

IB: It's also the key to the physiological response of audiences.

JW: Exactly. In the whole sort of visceral way of a film—the way music affects an audience, how one attacks the tempi. I think if you're dealing with a first-class director, you'll have less problems.

IB: Do you think that music can really describe anything, or do you think that it suggests through visual imagery? I realize we've inherited the romantic tradition.

JW: I was about to say it's largely cultural association. But what I think Kubrick has shown so wonderfully well is that the associations can be dispelled. Take a thing like the Strauss waltz in *2001*. The whole thing about a waltz is grace, and you see that the orchestra can achieve this. Kubrick takes what is the essence of courtly grace, the waltz, and uses it to accompany these lumbering but weightless giants out in space during their kind of sexual coupling. And even though the Strauss waltz in my mind, probably in yours too—it's the Danube, it's Viennese awful chocolate cakes and ghastly Viennese coffee. You know what I mean? But Kubrick says to us, "Watch the film for more than five seconds and forget those associations, and it will stop being nineteenth-century Vienna," and in the hands of Von Karajan the music becomes a work of art that says "look," that says "air," that says "float" in beautiful orchestral terms, and if you go with this film, the film helps dispel all of these associations, and we're into a new audio-visual world. Zarathustra too, but it's a less startling example.

IB: You're quite right about the visual thing.

JW: In any case, how anyone goes with that, I think that the film, which is the key element here, serves to cause hints in association with that music. The audio-visual coupling is the key to your original question, I think.

IB: What about music behind dialogue? This is a tricky thing. Do you like to work with single lines or solo instruments, or do you avoid writing behind dialogue entirely?

JW: It is a tricky thing. It's become a somewhat dated practice. Back in the old Warner Brothers days a picture was scored from beginning to end. I do find myself scoring dialogue scenes every now and then, and they can be very effective. I think a composer should think of the dialogue as part of the score; he could write it as accompaniment for a violin concerto rather than compose a score to exist on its own. There are a few little tips, for example, low strings—I find that in underscoring dialogue, if the dialogue has a low string sonority underneath it, very often it gives the dialogue something to sit on—the listener seems happy with that. This isn't to say that one can't have high frequencies as well, but I

think the choice of textures under the dialogue, the register of the speaking voices, and also the tempo of the dialogue—if a man says a line, and there's a pause, and the woman says the next line after another pregnant pause, it may be possible to color the music somewhat differently. If the dialogue is very tight and fast, it may create another kind of problem—you may have to go against that—a long-note-score kind of music rather than a congested, "notey" score. I think here is the thing of practice and, in the end context, style of the picture, etc., has everything to do with it.

IB: Do you think that there's too much music in films today, that films are overscored, or do you think it's the opposite?

JW: As a musician, I kind of think there's generally too much music everywhere—in the elevators, the office, everybody's car. I go to someone's house for dinner, and what do they do but put on records during dinner and right away my whole evening is interrupted—my mind is saying what key they are in, it's too slow or too fast.

IB: Airports, hospitals, everywhere.

JW: So that its effect has been lessened. That probably goes for films too. There's too much trashy music everywhere.

IB: Do you think that the tracks are too loud or too prominent?

JW: Sometimes, yes. I think all of this exposure to films has made the ways of the gentle art of music harder.

IB: How much control do you have over your score before and after the recording stage?

JW: It's a very difficult aspect. Again, some directors are very disposed to listen to a composer if they like him, if they respect him, if they've had good luck and good fortunes with him before and they trust him. Very often you will shrink with pain to hear what everyone regards as our work, and we know it represents about fifty percent of what we've done or less. This may also be one of the

answers to your question as to why so few contemporary composers will do films. That could be one of the reasons and a very good one, for it is most frustrating. A public exhibition of one's work, and very seldom does it represent faithfully the composer's work.

IB: What other film composers do you admire? Do you have any favorites?

JW: I have a lot of favorites. Jerry Goldsmith is a great favorite of mine. He's very versatile. There are some other older ones. Herrmann I admire; I think we all do. Maxwell Davies is a favorite composer of mine, not so much for his films—I don't think he's worked that successfully in films as yet, but he might if he chooses to and if he's interested in films.

IB: Leaving aside *Images* for a minute, what do you think is your best score or your best-scored scene from a film?

JW: The best score musically (not from a particularly good film) I think I'd have to say was *Jane Eyre*, which was a two-hour film for TV. The music is very much in a late nineteenth-century style and purpose, but the quality of the scenes and the number of them and the variety of them.

IB: You got the greatest satisfaction from doing that?

JW: Yes; as a piece of music, I wouldn't mind playing that in public. You couldn't really, because it's a pastiche of another style, necessitated by the Yorkshire atmosphere in the film. But I think that and *The Reivers*, which was the Faulkner film.

IB: Let's turn to *Images*. The credits on the screen say music by John Williams and sound by Stomu Yamashta. I don't know whether he improvised these sounds or whether he composed them, but you get the feeling that there were two composers involved in this score. Who wrote what?

JW: Well, there's a long and interesting history to this music. It was a Robert Altman film—script by him. Altman had been talking to me about this script for years. It was one

of those rare things where he said, "Write a piece of music first, and I'll film the score." That didn't happen. I didn't have time to write the music, and he went off on another picture, and the whole thing matured a couple of years later. But I'd been thinking about it and thinking about the schizophrenic quality of this film and this character. Here was a girl who one moment was in touch with reality and the next moment went out of touch altogether. And it seemed to me that the music should be done in two parts and it should have a duality for those reasons. So two or three years went by, and I went to see another of Altman's films in London last February. And when I looked at the film I instantly remembered the sculptures of Baschet. He had his sculptures here at UCLA about six years ago, and he had his associates and his family with him, and they performed on the sculptures. He played things like Viennese waltzes and *Flight of the Bumblebee*—it wasn't very interesting musically, but the noises these instruments made.

IB: Were they metallic?

JW: Well, most of his sculptures (Baschet is a serious sculptor, not a musician) are made to look at, they're made to see. And the noises they make are a kind of adjunct to them. They're stainless-steel surfaces sculpted like floral petals. Some of them are sixteen feet high; they're prominent visual works, and he has attachments of sawed-off glass rods that vibrate, and the vibrations go through a wire and activate these planes of steel, making the most unearthly sounds, wonderful noises. Dissolve. Two or three years later at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I walked in one day and there was the whole ground floor covered with Baschet, and if one put a dime in the little machine, he could pick up a headset and hear these noises created by Baschet. I forgot all about this, but when I saw in Altman's film exactly this thing, I thought now is my chance to put the music and his sculpture into a musical thing like a score. So I called André Previn and asked him about Baschet—he said, "Oh yes. Yamashta (the Japanese percussionist) plays them." And I knew Yamashta because he'd done a film for Ken Russell, *The Devils*, and he's a very great percussionist—American trained. So I rang up Yamashta, who lives in Paris, and he said, "Come over; we'll talk." So I went to Paris and asked him if he'd like to perform the percussion in this score. And he said yes, he would.

And he showed me his percussions, his Japanese bells, etc., and there's kind of this zanylike quality in this film anyway, and the whole thing began to take shape. For the other side of it, I knew I wanted to do a kind of pastoral, bucolic—something or other with lutes and strings.

IB: There's also that piano background in the opening. Are you playing that?

JW: That's right. Yes, I played all the keyboard, and Yamashta played all the percussion. He agreed to play, and we went to Baschet's studio; Yamashta was tremendously skilled even on conventional instruments, but he gave the most wonderful demonstration on these Baschet things, and I thought, "Aha, that's terrific." So I picked out two large instruments and one or two smaller ones to rent from Baschet, and that was the end of it. We shook hands, and Stomu showed up at the session, so to speak, as a playing musician, and he brought his gear with him. When I was in Paris, I made little notes for myself about the instruments: what they would do; what we would call them; a little, simple method of graph notation to time out these percussion effects with either the conventional music or the film action it was to correspond with. Where the credit business comes in—I was so pleased to have Stomu; he's such a well-known percussionist. I wanted to give him credit, to say, "Percussion played by Stomu Yamashta," and he said, "I'm trying to get away from the percussion; I want to expand my activities; I'd rather it be 'Sounds produced by. . . .' " So I think, perhaps, it was a kind of contractual agreement with him. He wanted that screen credit, and I wanted to give it to him—in the same way as if you wrote a violin concerto for somebody in a film, you would say, "Violin by so-and-so." I felt in this case, in a sense, that I was writing a percussion concerto with strings. So at Stomu's request, the idea of "sounds" was put on the film, and when you're doing things people don't usually think all that much about, who's going to take notice? It just seemed natural; that's what he wanted; we agreed. Stomu functioned as a percussionist; if it would be a concerto for percussion, this is how it would be described and perhaps should have been.

IB: But there were other percussion instruments. I heard chimes, wind chimes, bells, also blowing air through the flute.

JW: That's right. It wasn't all on the Baschets. We had the Inca flute and Kabuki percussion instruments. Then there were the Baschets—principally the four larger pieces of sculpture and few smaller pieces—plus all the conventional gear, which included timpani, hand drums, blocks, bells, marimbas—all these things, as well as a few tricks of his own—little shaking things, little sticklike Kabuki noises.

IB: But he did not improvise anything to the visuals?

JW: There are a few sections that are improvised within the context of a prepared timing—almost if one would do an aleatory bit of music. I might hit a chord with the orchestra and the score might indicate dashes for ten seconds on such and such an instrument—crescendo into double forte—that sort of thing.

IB: I never thought it was improvised. I always thought it was very well organized.

JW: Now, the way it was accomplished is of interest. I wanted to use all textures and strings and nothing else—the only thing added would be Stomu's voice. He does it in his concerts of some of Henze's pieces. So it was the Japanese style of the percussion, the resonance of the instruments, and his chest—he might even say "ouch" in Japanese. What I have on the score is just an aural noise, so his voice is a contribution. So there is, in fact, an immense creative contribution, because his performance is outstanding, I think, and deserving of every credit he has. I don't want to detract from Stomu's participation, but I felt very strongly that we have the discipline of the written symbol, timed to the film in its dramatic application, and that, I think, is what gives it its unique sense, rather than haphazardness, of taut discipline. So I reckoned percussion, keyboards—which I wanted to play all myself—and string orchestra. We began by recording—I wrote the score in the normal way—the string orchestra here, the keyboards here, and the percussion here. And the keyboards—I might play one particular section piano or piano twice, banging here, improvising something here, or playing something written here. The keyboard might be on three lines, which would require—since I was going to play it all—three overdubs on the piano; the percussion is

almost always four or five lines. You would hear Japanese woodblocks, you would hear Baschet-sculpture percussion, you might hear timpani, etc., in one sequence. My idea was to make the most personal, idiosyncratic thing, have one man play everything, rather than have four percussionists, which I could have done—let Stomu play everything. So the first thing I did was record the string orchestra for a whole day—all the traditional music, all of this material, and to time it exactly when the legitimate orchestra stopped and Stomu and I started with either our written notes or whatever we were going to do. And then we would select one, i.e., the woodblocks and the piano first. It was done on sixteen-track tapes, so we put the string orchestra left, center, and right; that left me thirteen tracks of tape to play around with. And we proceeded in that way. Stomu would take line one and play that, then line two, putting on the earphones to hear what he just recorded on line one. Then on line three he heard lines one and two back. And I drew on the score—where, if you play pa pa, I play ta tee; I'm taking my notes from your cue. In this case he would just follow the arrows, which are indicated on the percussion production notes. And he followed himself with his own timings and made a wonderful effect.

IB: Also, the instruments have tremendous presence, as though they're amplified and reverbed and echoed all over the place.

JW: Yes, some of these Baschet instruments—I wish you could see them—instantly make wonderful noises. A lot of these noises Stomu pointed out to me; if you put your ear on the right place on the plane, the buildup would be most beautiful or the sonority would be the most attractive.

The preceding interview is taken from: Knowing the Score: Notes on Film Music, © 1975 by Irwin Bazelon