

MUSIC

NSO throws John Williams a birthday bash fit for the big screen

Steven Spielberg, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Daisy Ridley, Yo-Yo Ma, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and a full house turn out to celebrate the storied composer at 90

By [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

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Much like the 109 films John Williams has scored, a birthday party for him is a big production.

At the Kennedy Center on Thursday night, there were lights, cameras and no shortage of action as the National Symphony Orchestra, led by French conductor Stéphane Denève, toasted Williams's 90th birthday and brought his massive cinematic legacy to life, often with astonishing richness and detail.

There was a phalanx of celebrity guests on hand to perform Williams's music or pay tribute to his (frankly, unfathomable) musical contributions. They included violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, Star Wars actress Daisy Ridley, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, six-time Olympic athlete Jackie Joyner-Kersey and director Steven Spielberg, with whom Williams has scored a history-making 29 films over 50 years.

Even the NSO was operating at conspicuously full force, with 97 musicians overtaking the Concert Hall stage — as well as the boxes above it, where the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets emerged in the evening's second half to deliver a chill-inducing account of Williams's famous "Olympic Fanfare and Theme."

To drive home the evening's big-screen energy there was ... a big screen, suspended over the orchestra and showing various montages, call-ins and clips. (This included a full screening of Kobe Bryant and Glen Keane's Oscar-winning 2017 short film, "[Dear Basketball](#)," accompanied by the orchestra and movingly introduced via video by the late NBA star's wife, Vanessa Bryant.)

(Perhaps best of all, there was quiet on the set! I heard nary a beep nor bloop from the sold-out crowd. Good job, y'all. Oscars for everyone!)

Yet despite all the big names and Hollywood-level production values of the celebration, what stood out the most (and lingered the longest in my mind on the walk home) was the unexpected intimacy of Williams's music, which feels hard-wired in my DNA, enmeshed in multiple dimensions of my memory and experience (and quite likely yours).

And as the program proceeded, each theme seemed to light up different parts of the audience. Younger listeners straightened up upon hearing "Hedwig's Theme" from the Harry Potter series played by Mutter (with whom Williams has recorded three albums). Listeners, like me, who were Elliott's age when "E.T." dramatically peaced out into the clouds, shed some leftover tears at the theme to its end credits.

("I have great news for you," Denève said from the podium after the proverbial spaceship lifted off. "John Williams is from our planet, and he's here tonight.")

And listeners who have been there since Williams started making noise as a composer must have delighted at the arc of ambition and achievement represented by his work, vivaciously realized by Denève and the NSO.

On Thursday's program, Williams's theme to 1977's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" represented as close to a primordial soup as one could order: Denève (the music director of the Brussels Philharmonic and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra) drew out the music's Pendereckian dissonances and unsettling tectonic shifts, its Shepardesque tones (now ubiquitous in film music) teeming like an array of radiators.

But he also highlighted how the shocking and disturbing elements of Williams's best music so often resolve into unlikely, otherworldly beauty; the familiar is always kept within view, a shrinking blue dot, a blip of hope. Denève let its alien calling-card theme bloom and build into a beautifully constructed climax, chimes breaking out over its surface like goose bumps.

Though we were often (perhaps too often) furnished with video accompaniment, the true treat of the night was this music-first approach.

Themes as well-worn as Indiana Jones's hat enjoyed fresh vigor — including the unexpectedly complex "Marion's Theme" from the Indiana franchise and Williams's rambunctiously evocative action-sequence-in-sound, "Scherzo for Motorcycle and Orchestra."

Yo-Yo Ma appeared to roaring applause to deliver one of the slightest renderings of the theme to "Schindler's List" I've ever heard. He played it perfectly imperfectly, the melody dented by memory here and there, but more tender for it — a terrible recollection working its way out. (And, again, that impossible beauty.)

An unexpected duet between Ma and Mutter was really more of a duel — the one from “The Adventures of Tintin” in particular. The two players traded taunts and parries, their lines racing around each other like a pair of squirrels. It was a bit of comic relief, but it was also a showcase of Williams’s hammier talents (not to mention Denève’s budding potential as a director!).

Even the theme to “Jurassic Park” attained grander dimensions — that primal opening salvo, its slow revelation of scale, the groaning horns and loping rhythms in the distance. Everywhere in Williams’s music is a complexity that can easily evade your attention in the thrill ride of its usual context.

Spielberg, who became aware of (and committed to) Williams after hearing his score for the 1969 film “The Reivers,” recalled hearing the “heart of a child” and “the sophisticated complexity of Prokofiev and Mahler at work in his scores, and being surprised by the composer’s modesty upon meeting him.”

“I thought someone with such musical sophistication was going to be really erudite or grumpy,” Spielberg said, “or at least have an Austrian accent. But not Johnny.”

Spielberg’s was among the night’s most touching tributes, ending with a warm embrace in the rows to a standing ovation.

Perhaps clearer than the unexpected depths of Williams’s music was the overwhelming breadth of his reach. A litany of directors (Ron Howard, George Lucas, Chris Columbus, J.J. Abrams, Lawrence Kasdan) sang his praises in roll-in clips. Joyner-Kersee praised the “intensity, sacrifice, friendship and determination” captured by Williams in his fanfares and themes for the Olympic Games. Between electric performances of themes from Star Wars, Mark Hamill (via video) and Ridley (onstage) thanked him for, as Ridley put it, “elevating the work we do on film beyond recognition.”

“Beyond recognition.” It’s a phrase that stuck with me long after the concert, which, by the way, ended with Williams taking the stage to lead a surprise run through the “Imperial March,” the entire orchestra and audience offering a spirited account of “Happy Birthday,” and burst of golden streamers and confetti that scared the hell out of everybody for a second.

If anything, the task of performing Williams is to do just that — to go beyond recognition, beyond the familiar leitmotifs and little melodies we all have etched into the surface of our memories, and to listen more attentively. A close encounter with his music can change the way you hear everything.

John Williams at 90: Jurassic Park in Concert comes to the Kennedy Center on June 24. kennedy-center.org. The NSO also will perform Williams’s score for “Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back” alongside a screening of the movie at Wolf Trap on July 29. wolftrap.org.