

Valences of the musical - thematic language, in the movie E.T. the Extra - Terrestrial, composed by John Williams

Mirela VOICU¹

Abstract: *Generally, my personal interest for this theme and for the predominant representative has not only manifested itself in terms of understanding a musical language existing in the thematic form, at the basis of a cinematographic action, but also in terms of discovering and better understanding the action of the entire film in which John Williams found himself as a conductor, pianist, composer, who was to define his musical personality at the end of the 20th century.*

E.T.:The - Extra-Terrestrial is one of Steven Spielberg's best-known and best-loved films, and is considered his most personal film, with many aspects of his childhood. The story is captivating and brings together a considerable number of spectacular characters and situations. With aliens having long been an attraction, not only for the composer but also for moviegoers. In addition, John Williams wrote one of the most successful scores for E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, the soundtrack is full of memorable themes and textures that underline all of the film's defining characteristics. The personal approach refers strictly to the structure of the musical themes, elements of language and musical syntax.

Keywords: *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial; film; muzică; John Williams;*

Introduction

The film E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial was released in 1982, directed by Spielberg and written by Melissa Mathison (her script was based on an original story by Spielberg). The idea of an imaginary creature came to Spielberg, similar to the aliens that appear in the ending of the 1977 film Close Encounters, John Williams composed the music, which was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra and orchestrated by Herbert W. Spencer.

As a composer, John Williams is appreciated and recognized as a musical personality, thanks to his creations, having in his record works for various films, but the emblematic music, which brought him fame, is science fiction and fantasy music. Some of his most representative soundtracks are in the following movies: E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982), Star Wars (1977), Jurassic Park (1993), Superman (1978), which brought him numerous Oscar, Grammy, Emmy and Bafta awards.

Returning to E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, most of the roles were received by young actors, and here we mention Henry Thomas as Elliot, Drew Barrymore as Gertie and Robert MacNaughton as Michael. Dee Wallace was cast as the children's mother, Mary, and Peter Coyote played the mysterious government agent, Keys. Spielberg held a preview screening at the

¹ Faculty of Arts of the University "Ovidius" from Constanta, mirelagheorghel0@gmail.com.

Medallion Theatre in Dallas, Texas, which he considered "his lucky theatre"² and it was a real success and premiered at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival.

1. E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial or Steven Spielberg's childhood.

"In E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial the music guides our understanding of the gradually developing friendship between Elliot and E.T. and makes this bond stronger and more vivid"³. There isn't much dialogue in the film, so the music interacts so well with the action, the deep feelings and the emotions of the characters, creating an extraordinary dramatic emotional impact in certain scenes. In the musical score written by John Williams leitmotifs are used, associated with certain characters, and the themes are varied in nature, the leap of perfect pitch is the most unifying element of the thematic material and appears in every theme in the score, more or less visible in some, but always present.

2. Structure of musical themes, elements of musical language and syntax in *E.T. the Extra - Terrestrial*

The melodic construction of certain themes is based on harmonic sequences of thirds (mediating relationship) or seconds, while in other themes we find the Lydian mode, and present perfect fourth intervals.

Harmonically, the score is built on various chord extensions, sevenths and major ninths. The music is also developmental, so many themes are only hinted at first, then developed throughout the work. For example, the theme of flight is introduced gradually, first suggested with a few notes, then followed with the whole theme played by the whole orchestra, which coincides with the scene of the bicycle rising and flying past the moon. Spielberg uses the piccolo flute as the solo instrument in the E.T. theme. The surprising choice of the instrument is suggesting and highlighting E.T.'s gentle, human nature. The theme of this scene is written in the Lidian mode, and the IVth scale of this mode gives the music a mysterious quality.



Fig. 1. Piccolo reduction of the E.T. theme from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, measures 1-3, by John Williams⁴

The musical theme that accompanies the scene of the aliens and their spaceship at the beginning of the film has a long, wandering melody in 4/4, played in octaves, in which the

² Steven Spielberg. 2002. *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial: From the concept to classic: The Illustrated Story of the Film and Filmmakers*. New York: Newmarket Press, p. 167.

³ Emilio Audissino. 2017. *Film/Music Analysis: A Film Studies Approach, Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture, Charm*. Switzerland: Springer, p. 192.

⁴ Emilio Audissino, 2018. "John Williams: Music for Films, Television and the Concert Stage (Contemporary Composers)". In *John Williams: Music for Films, Television and the Concert Stage*, ed. by Emilio Audissino. Contemporary Composers. Volumul 1. Turnhout: Brepols, p. 298.

melodic bass line, built on second values, moves slightly towards the lower register. John Williams creates a fantastic timbre using the unique combination of string, wind and organ instruments. The large intervallic leaps of the melodic line and frequent changes of unrelated harmonies lead to a not quite tonal music. This aspect integrates you into the science fiction atmosphere of the music.



Fig. 2. Organ reduction of the alien theme from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial*, measures 1-5, by John Williams⁵

For Keys and the government agents, Williams wrote an ominous tune somewhat reminiscent of the Imperial March from *The Empire Strikes Back*, complete with a modulation in the lower half note from G minor to E \flat minor.



Fig.3. Bassoon reduction of Kays' theme from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial*, measures 1-4, by John Williams⁶

The children play key roles in the film, their transportation is done with bicycles, so this scene is supported musically by the violin. The moment is expansively and vivaciously realised, with John Williams managing to achieve an exuberant and lively theme. The theme is divided into two sections; Bicycle Theme 1, is more of a rhythmic sequence, with energetic and syncopated beats in 6/8 time and is used throughout the film, but becomes more prominent in the second half, when the children are followed by government agents.



Fig.4. Violin reduction of the bicycle theme, section A, from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial*, measures 1- 6, by John Williams⁷

Bicycle Theme 2, is a melodic, 2/2 time signature with a fast-flowing pulse suggesting languor or the moment of searching, thus explaining the presence of large intervals and the rising of the IVth scale on the D \flat sound in the Lydian mode.

⁵ John Williams. 1982. *Selections from E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*, arranged by Frank Metis. NY: Music Corporation of America, p. 4-5.

⁶ Chloé Huvet. 2018. "John Williams and Sound Design: Shaping the Audiovisual World of E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial". In *John Williams: Music for Films, Television and the Concert Stage*, ed. by Emilio Audissino. Contemporary Composers. Volume 1. Turnhout: Brepols, p. 301.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 328.



Fig.5. Violin reduction of the bicycle theme, section A, from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, measures 1-4, by John Williams.⁸

The musical theme below is found as the uplifting melodic support of the friendship scene between Elliot and E.T. and is interpretatively exposed by the solo harp or celesta. The moment is suggestively created by this instrument precisely to highlight the intimate nature of their relationship.



Fig.6. Harp reduction of the friendship theme from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, measures 1-3, by John Williams.⁹

Another important and best-known theme is the Flight theme, which is frequently performed in concerts dedicated to film music. Williams is present as conductor, so under his baton the orchestra performs his now famous music. This wonderful theme is often requested by the audience and played at the encore.

Its structure is based on two sections; the A interplayed by the violin in 2/2 binary meter which opens with an ascending interval of perfect fifth, the melodic line fluctuates up and down. Each phrase is played successively one tone higher, and there are increasingly larger leaps up to octaves.



Fig.7. Violin reduction of the flight theme, section A, from the soundtrack of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, measures 1-4, by John Williams¹⁰

The B, is also played by the violin, in the measure of 3/2, but this time the composer builds the flight theme on a sinuous, chromatic melodic line with unusual harmonic changes.



⁸ Emilio Audissino. 2017. *Film/Music Analysis: A Film Studies Approach (Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture)*. Switzerland: Springer, p. 212.

⁹ Chloé Huvet, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

¹⁰ John Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Fig.8. *Violin reduction of the flight theme, section B, from the soundtrack of E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, measures 1-4, by John Williams¹¹*

The theme of drunkenness is heard during scenes where E.T. and Elliot are drunk. Although the music of this theme is different from the other themes, it is set in Lydian mode, and does not go beyond the perfect fifth range, and this time these aspects are common to many themes in the film (such as E.T.'s Theme and Bicycle Theme 2). It is gentle at first, then becomes a heavy, clunky tune through which the characters' intoxication with alcohol is humorously captured.



Fig.9. *Violin reduction of the drunkenness theme from the soundtrack of E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, measures 8-13, by John Williams¹²*

The Escape Fanfare theme only appears in the film's final sequence, when the children evade government agents and attempt to return E.T. to his spaceship.

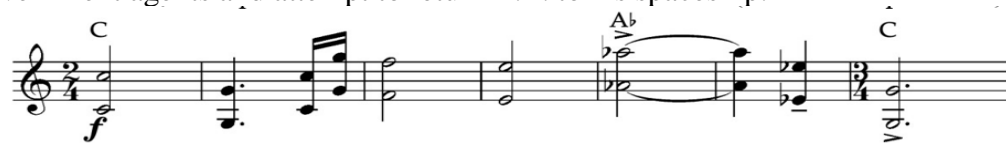


Fig.10. *Reduction for two trumpets of the Escape Fanfare theme from the soundtrack of E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial, measures 5-11, by John Williams¹³*

The Escape Fanfare theme music bears similarities to the third part of Howard Hanson's Symphony No. 2, "Romantica". Hanson's music was used as temporary music while the film was being edited, and his influence can be heard in the music of John Williams.

The orchestration and rhythmic formulas in the accompaniment are very similar to what Hanson wrote in his symphony. Beyond the apparent similarities, the themes are distinct and the music unfolds differently. One example of John Williams paraphrasing another composer's music and making it his own is the opening part of "The Planet Krypton" from Superman: The Movie, which is a variation of Also Sprach Zarathustra and also "The Serpentine Flight" from the film "Home Alone" which has similar features to the character dance from "The Nutcracker". We can note other similarities with Elmer Bernstein's score for To Kill a Mockingbird. In a general sense, the music for E.T. and "To Kill a Mockingbird" are based on a much simpler orchestration, emphasizing solo instruments (flute, piccolo, harp, and piano), later using smaller instrumental combinations (such as piccolo, French horns, and string instruments from E.T.'s theme). It is interesting to note that for both scores he uses the same mode, Lydian. The farewell theme is featured when the spaceship lands at the end of the film, as the two characters say goodbye to each other. Section A of this theme is based on a fragment of Bicycle

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

Theme 2, and section B is based on the main theme, The Flight Theme. These fragments become motifs that are repeated, sequenced and reversed to create this theme with deep emotional impact.



Fig.11. *Violin Reduction of Farewell Theme, Section A, from the E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial soundtrack, mesures 1-8, by John Williams*¹⁴



Fig.12. *Violin Reduction of the Farewell Theme, Section B, from the E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial soundtrack, mesures 20-23, by John Williams*¹⁵

3. Conclusions

In conclusion we say that E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial was a huge success when it was released and that is why it has remained popular to this day. Currently, the American Film Institute has ranked it as the 24th best film of all time. The story is compelling and brings together a number of spectacular characters and situations, even if aliens have long been a draw for moviegoers, and there have been countless films over the years with such a theme, none of them seems to exceed E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial.

In addition, John Williams wrote one of the most accomplished scores for E.T., the music overflows with memorable themes and textures that highlight all the nuances and the particularities that define the film. The musical themes are diverse in character, but unified and strategically developed throughout the film.

The Extra-Terrestrial still amazes for nearly forty years, and the music plays an essential role in its success, Spielberg himself has stated on numerous occasions that Williams' music itself becomes a character in his films. The scene when the powers of E.T. lifted the bicycle into the sky, the magic of John Williams' music made it fly.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30-31.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

4. References

Books

- Audissino, Emilio. 2017. *Film/Music Analysis: A Film Studies Approach*, Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture, Charm, Switzerland: Springer.
- David, Richard. 1999. *Complete guide to film scoring*. edited by Berktee Press.
- Prendergast, M. Roy. 1977,1992. *Film Music, A Neglected Art*, N: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Smith C. Steven. 1991. *C.A Heart at Fire's Center*. Berkeley. California: University of California Press.
- Spielberg, Steven. 2002. *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial: From the concept to classic: The Illustrated Story of the Film and Filmmakers*. New York: Newmarket Press.
- Williams, John. 1982. *Selections from E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*, arranged by Frank Metis. NY: Music Corporation of America.

Articles from books

- Audissino, Emilio. 2018. "Introduction: John Williams, Composer". In *John Williams: Music for Films, Television and the Concert Stage*, ed. by Emilio Audissino. Contemporary Composers. Volumul 1. Turnhout: Brepols: 421.
- Huvet, Chloé, 2018. "John Williams and Sound Design: Shaping the Audiovisual World of E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial". In *John Williams: Music for Films, Television and the Concert Stage*, ed. by Emilio Audissino. Contemporary Composers. Volume 1. Turnhout: Brepols: 427.