

## 45. ET (1982): Flying theme John Williams

### Background information and Performance Circumstances

- John Williams (born 1932) is widely considered to be one of the most important film composers of recent times.
- His scores have been nominated for many awards, and he has (so far) won no fewer than five Academy Awards (Oscars) – his music for ET receiving one of them.
- He has collaborated with some of the greatest directors (Spielberg, George Lucas) on many celebrated films (*Jaws*, *The Star Wars* series, *Indiana Jones* series, *Schindler's List*, three *Harry Potter* films, *Jurassic Park*).
- Williams revitalised and re-popularised the use of grand late-Romantic scores in movies from the 1970s onwards, when the whole genre was under threat from contemporary and pop influenced styles. His musical technique lies in the tradition of Korngold and Max Steiner, with a late nineteenth century approach to melody, harmony and orchestration at the root of his musical style.
- NAM 45 *ET: Flying Theme* is taken from an orchestral suite based on music cues from the film. It can therefore not be exactly matched with the pictures on the screen, but much of the music can be heard as ET and Eliot flee from the authorities, culminating in the famous moment where the bicycle leaves the ground and flies under ET's power.
- It is common for film composers to employ orchestrators and in this case Herbert Spencer was responsible for the detailed scoring, under supervision from John Williams.

### Performing forces and their handling

- ET: Flying theme uses a full symphony orchestra,
  - Double woodwind (but lacking any wider family members, e.g. Piccolo/Cor Anglais/Bass Clarinet/Contrabassoon)
  - 4 Horns, 3 Trumpets, 3 Trombones and Tuba –conventional sized symphonic brass section
  - Timpani, Bells, Suspended cymbals
  - Piano
  - Strings
- traditional symphonic/Romantic treatment of the orchestra with much doubling of parts
- relatively few uses of solo timbres or lighter textures – mostly quite thickly scored.

1-8	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quaver ostinato pattern in Violins/Clarinets /Flutes ( octave doubled)</li> <li>• Regular quaver chords in piano/horns/violas/cellos</li> <li>• Periodic alternations of Tonic and dominant in Timpani and basses</li> <li>• 2/2 metre</li> </ul>
9-16	Main theme (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sweeping unison main theme, played across 3 octaves by all woodwind instruments and all strings except the</li> </ul>

		<p>double basses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horns/Piano continue the momentum of the opening with repeated quaver chords, supported by sonorous trombone chords</li> <li>• Bass/Tuba play pedal/stepwise line which anchors harmony</li> <li>• Metre changes to 3/2</li> </ul>
17-24	Main theme repeated. (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lighter but more varied texture:</li> <li>• pizzicato version of 9-16 bass line in cello/basses/piano LH</li> <li>• Legato mid-range quavers in Clarinets</li> <li>• Quaver movement continues in piano RH and tremolando Viola</li> <li>• 'chattering' staccato figures played every other bar by bells/Flutes, always beginning on the second quaver.</li> <li>• Sustained chords in Bassoons/Trombones from 20</li> <li>• Violins repeat main theme from 9-16</li> </ul>
25-33	Contrasting section (B)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New two-bar idea played by Flute, then with Bassoon/Cellos, then Horns/Trumpets</li> <li>• Repeated Quaver chord figure returns in Horns, doubled by Violins/Violas/Piano</li> <li>• Sustained chords in Bassoons/Trombones/Tuba/Cello /Basses from 29</li> <li>• Timpani/Suspended cymbal rolls aid move into next section</li> <li>• Unison(octave doubled) quaver figures (cross rhythms) in Flutes/Oboes/Clarinets/Horns/Trumpets</li> </ul>
34-41	Main theme (A) in dominant key	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main theme played in octaves by Flutes/Oboes/Clarinets/Trumpets/Bells/Violins/ Violas</li> <li>• Sustained chords in Bassoons/Trombones, articulated by repeated quaver figures in Horns/Pianos</li> <li>• Tuba/Piano LH/Cello/pizz basses play 'usual' bass line for this theme</li> </ul>
42-54	Contrasting (B)section extended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 42-45 – octave doubled Violins/Violas develop first bar of B section in rising sequence</li> <li>• Brass/Bassoon chords/Cello/Bass pizzicato as before</li> <li>• 46-52 octave doubled Flute/Oboe/Clarinet (joined by Horns/Trumpet at 50) play 2-bar theme from B section</li> <li>• Violins/Violas/Cellos mix upward pizzicato figures with tremolando playing</li> <li>• Staccato/pizz bass continues in Basses/Tuba piano LH</li> <li>• Brass instruments articulate the double dotted rhythms in 47/49/51/52</li> <li>• 53-54 Quaver cross-rhythm figures ( see 32-33) octave doubled in Flute/Oboe/Clarinet/Trumpet/Violins/Violas</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cymbal/Timp crescendo rolls link into next section</li> </ul>
55-62	Main theme (A) back in the tonic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme doubled across 3 octaves again by Flutes/Oboes/Clarinets/Violins/Violas/cellos</li> <li>• Orchestration very similar to 9-16</li> </ul>
63-68	Main theme (A) slightly shortened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horns play slightly modified version of theme in imitation, one bar after other instruments</li> <li>• Music slows dramatically on last four quavers of 68</li> <li>• Crash cymbal at 63</li> </ul>
69-87	Coda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 69-73<sup>1</sup> Rising brass/Piano quaver scales (parallel triads) initially over Timp/cello/bass dominant pedal</li> <li>• 73<sup>4</sup>-end Widely-spaced String/Brass chords support varied versions of A theme (first two bars) in octave doubled Flutes/Oboes/Clarinets then diminuendo to quieter version in Flute/trumpet</li> <li>• Final arpeggio in bells over <b>p</b> sustained chords in Flute/Brass/Strings</li> <li>• Metre changes to 3/2 at 75, and back to 2/2 at 82</li> </ul>

## Texture

- This extract is dominated by various types of homophonic texture
  - The opening is homorhythmic, with all instruments playing, or articulating the continuous quaver movement across the orchestra
  - From bar 9 onwards the texture is mostly melody-dominated homophony, with the (often) octave doubled tune supported by block or articulated chords
- There are some variations to this basic texture
  - At the second statement of the main theme the second bar of each pair is overlaid with a staccato downward figure in Flutes and Bells – this hardly has enough shape to be considered a true countermelody, but it does provide another point of interest while the main theme is being repeated.
  - During the fifth repetition of the main theme the Horns imitate the theme, one bar after the rest of the orchestra. The Horn material is altered, particularly in its second phrase, to fit the harmony.
- For more details of the variety of orchestral textures used in this extract please see Performing forces table (above)
- A variety of pedal textures is used in this extract
  - Articulated internal tonic and dominant pedals in Cellos/Horn/Piano throughout the first 8 bars
  - Tonic bass pedal bars 9-11 and 13-14 (repeated on each occurrence of the main theme)
  - Pedals featuring octave leaps 17-24
  - Sustained bass pedals 79<sup>6</sup>-end
- Ostinato textures 1-8

## Structure

- The structure of this extract is completely dominated by the five repetitions of the theme first heard in bars 9-16
- This theme is heard five times, with the third statement being in the dominant key (G) and the last shortened by 2 bars
- Two contrasting sections separate some of the main theme sections
- The extract begins with an introduction and ends with a coda, itself based on the first phrase of the main theme.

1-8	Introduction
9-16	Main theme (A)
17-24	Main theme repeated. (A)
25-33	Contrasting section (B)
34-41	Main theme (A) in dominant key
42-54	Contrasting (B) section extended
55-62	Main theme (A) back in the tonic.
63-68	Main theme (A) slightly shortened
69-87	Coda

- The main theme appears only in the tonic key (C), or in the dominant (G).
- The contrasting sections visit more remote keys (see 'Tonality') below.
- The structure of this piece is articulated and dominated by the main theme.

## Tonality

- This extract is tonal, with a strong diatonic feel. However, its tonal plan is not entirely conventional.

Bars	Main Key(s)
1-8	C (major)
9-16	C
17-24	C
25-33	B - E flat
34-41	G
42-54	Hints at E flat
55-62	C
63-68	C
69-87	C (ambiguous major/minor chord at first). Hints of Lydian mode with F#.

## Harmony

- The harmony is predominantly tonal and diatonic, but not always functional
- Major and minor chords, mostly in root position and first inversion, are used as the basis for the harmonic style
- There are few conventional cadence points
- Modulations are not achieved in a conventional way, with the music often slipping chromatically, or simply stepping into, the new key
- More complex chords and progressions are used, often in a non-functional way

- Use of major chords with added dissonant notes - the constant repetition of the notes G, C and D in the opening section form alternately C<sup>2</sup> or G7sus4 chords
- Chords whose roots are a third apart are used in the contrasting B sections – bar 25 B major chord /26<sup>1</sup> G major 26<sup>2</sup> B major
- Non-functional progressions, often using chromatic bass lines, are used to link sections in different keys – bar 29 E flat/G; 30 F# minor; 31 Dm/F; 32 B flat/D
- Diminished seventh chords are used, often as a substitute for chord V – the statements of the main theme in G (bar 34) and the return to the tonic (bar 55) are both preceded by diminished seventh chords
- 7<sup>th</sup> and major seventh chords are used freely, without preparation and without resolution of the dissonant 7<sup>th</sup> – bars 16 and 34
- Tonally ambiguous chords are used, particularly at the end of the extract –
  - From 73<sup>4</sup> both major and minor thirds of the tonic chord are sounded, with the flattened third (E flat) at the bottom of the texture, and the major third two octaves or more above – a simultaneous false relation
  - This instability is exaggerated by the prominent use of the note F# in the melody that is played above these chords
  - The chord at 83 is an amalgamation of notes from the C major and D major chords, with DF#A played over C and G
- Bars 9-16 illustrate further the complex nature of the harmonic features of the extract
  - Bar 9-10 Chord I in C ( with added 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>) C bass pedal
  - 11 V<sup>7</sup>d in G (secondary dominant chord) (C bass pedal) moving to
  - 12 Ib in G (with added major seventh)
  - 13 II<sup>7</sup>d in C (C bass pedal)
  - 14 C minor with a flattened sixth or A flat major 7<sup>th</sup> /C bass (pedal)
  - 15 Dominant minor 9<sup>th</sup> in G (nb enharmonic alternative in piano part)
  - 16 C major 7<sup>th</sup> chord

## Melody

- The opening Flute/Clarinet/Violin 4-note ostinato figures consistently feature three notes - G, B, C – with the other note of the figure changing to reflect changes in the harmony. The expectant character of this idea is created partially by the quaver rhythm, and partially by the effect of the semitone B-C idea, heard every other crotchet beat
- The melodic features of this extract are inevitably dominated by the features of the often repeated main theme (first heard in bars 9-16)
  - An 8 bar melody (statements 1-4) built from periodic 2-bar phrases (see 9-16)
  - The opening 2 bar phrase provides the rhythm and the general melodic shape for the first 6 bars of the melody
  - The rising fifth idea (common not only to other themes in *ET*, but also to other famous themes by Williams – *Stars Wars*, for example) is inverted to a falling fourth in bar 10, separated by a turn figure

- Both of these ideas are developed in free sequence in the four bars that follow, where the rising fifth is expanded to an octave and then a seventh, while the turn idea is firstly repeated up a tone (11), then reversed in rhythmic diminution at the end of bar 14
- Bar 15 begins by repeating the first notes of bar 14, but ends with a dramatic double-dotted figure, the rhythm of which is used later in the extract
- Motivic development like this is typical of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century procedures that so influenced Williams' style
- The references to the main theme in the coda section give prominence to the note F# (the raised or Lydian fourth), which some commentators have suggested remind the listener of ET's alien nature
- The melodic material of the two contrasting sections are constructed very differently from the broad, heroic certainty of the main theme
  - The intervals are much smaller – at its first appearance, at bar 25-26, the idea uses smaller intervals (nothing larger than a fourth) and with a much more unsettled tonal feel
  - The unsettled, restless, quaver rhythm of the first bar can be traced to the flute 'countermelody' in the previous section, while the second bar uses the concluding rhythm of the main theme (15<sup>3</sup>-16)
  - The section is developed by repeating this two bar idea a diminished fourth higher, and then by repeating the second bar alone, slightly varied.
  - A new idea, in 32-33, uses semitone quavers to smooth the transition into the next section
  - On its return, at 42, ideas from this section are used differently at first
    - 42-45 The first bar (heard at 25) is developed alone, in a rising sequence
    - 46-55 are a rescored and transposed repeat of 25-34

## Rhythm and metre

- The essentially positive nature of this extract is supported by a straightforward and accessible approach to rhythm, typical of many of Williams' more well-known melodies
- The music moves either in a 2/2 meter or in 3/2. In both cases the meter is made obvious by strong downbeats and regular, periodic phrasing
- There is little syncopation, although the accented low E flats in the coda appear to have been placed on a weak part of the beat to provide surprise or suspense
- The strong themes, often with regular, repeated quaver accompaniment, give a sense of forward momentum
- The rhythmic figures in the two contrasting sections use more restless rhythms, often with the use of a quaver rest, a tie, or a double-dotted crotchet-semiquaver figure
- The 'otherworldliness' of ET is perhaps represented, in the Coda, by the triplet quaver figures- the only ones in the extract