

The New Sound Of The Empire

Like it or not, John Williams is ready to retire after a lifetime of redefining the sound of Hollywood. Who could define the new sound of *Star Wars a la* Disney?

by Earl Green and Rob Heyman



John Williams, the man who created the music of *Star Wars*, 1970s/'80s cinematic *Superman*, *Jaws*, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, and dozens of others, hasn't left the building yet - but he is ready to hand off the grueling pace, constant revisions and edits, travel, and studio prep and post-production of movie scoring to a new generation of composers.

Alexandre Desplat (of the recent *Godzilla* remake and the *Twilight* movies) has already landed the plum assignment - well, *maybe* it's a plum assignment - of scoring the first *Star Wars* "Anthology" film, *Rogue One*, due in late 2016. It's probably fair to say that the current generation of film composers active in Hollywood today was almost certainly influenced or inspired by Williams; to play in the musical sandbox of the *Star Wars* universe is certainly a dream come true. Doing so without a lot of overanalysis and armchair quarterbacking from picky film music fans is probably also a dream, but not one that's likely to come true for the first person to step into Williams' shoes. It's hard to envy Alexandre Desplat for that, and we can only wish him the best of luck and hope the Force is with him.

And yet Desplat isn't the first to step up to that hallowed podium with a ream of new *Star*

Wars sheet music in hand that wasn't composed by Williams. Video game and computer game soundtracks built around the *Star Wars* universe have been around for ages, from primitive MIDI (*Dark Forces*, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter*) to full symphonic spectaculars (*Shadows Of The Empire*). There have also been attempts at side-steps into different styles (remixed by David Lewison, *Star Wars: Force Commander's* fusion of Williams' original orchestral recordings with elements of techno-metal was apparently greeted with bared fangs by Williams' agents, according to a composer who worked on a later *Star Wars* game). Over the course of the much-loved animated series, Clone Wars and Rebels, former Dennis McCarthy collaborator Kevin Kiner has taken a synth-orchestral approach that spends equal time revering Williams' work and rocking out in more modern style.

In the midst of this mishmash of styles and approaches is the realization that *Star Wars* music can be anything; that the movies have, thus far, remained in a 19th century Romantic/European vein has really been a bit of a fluke. Williams himself did not sit still stylistically; his clockwork synth-percussion-heavy score for Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992) set film scoring trends that persisted through much of the '90s, and was nothing like anything heard in his *Star Wars* scores. Williams'



exit from the conductor's podium is a signal that, very much like the future of *Star Wars* as a movie/TV/entertainment franchise, the future is wide open to variety of interpretations and styles.

Here, then, are our picks for current and rising composers who could shake up the *Star Wars* universe, while honoring the past. We may be anticipating "the last John Williams *Star Wars* soundtrack" with mixed feelings, but the future might just be bright – and loud.

Music by MURRAY GOLD

Doctor Who, Torchwood, The Second Coming

The sole composer-in-residence for the BBC's 21st century revival of Doctor Who, Murray Gold has often made the TARDIS sound like it's making an attack run on the Death Star. With a fantastic melodic sense (and an almost unparalleled demo reel thick with the thundering BBC National Orchestra of Wales), Gold would be a natural for the Star Wars universe - if, that is, he can be talked into a commute away from Gallifrey. He has successfully rewritten the musical DNA of a show whose history was thick with experimental synthesizers; modern Doctor Who fans now expect nothing less than orchestral splendor for the Time Lord's travels; that musical style would serve Jedi Knights well too. **Recommended listening:** *Doctor Who Series 4; Doctor Who: Day Of The Doctor / Time Of The Doctor.* -EG

Music by CARTER BURWELL

The Big Lebowski, No Country For Old Men, The Blind Side, Twilight

With a wonderfully diverse portfolio, Carter Burwell has carved out an impressive composing career, demonstrating his versatility with off-beat hits like *Fargo* and *Being John Malkovich*. It's his score for the final installment in the *Twilight* movie series, *Breaking Dawn, Part 2*, that provides the strongest qualifier for a *Star Wars* assignment. His evocative and heavily thematic score for the first *Twilight* movie earned him a rabid fan base, who rallied hard for his return when the final two films went into production (Incidentally, *Rogue One* recruit Alexandre Desplat was given the scoring reigns for the second *Twilight* movie, *New Moon*). Not unlike John Williams himself in the *Star Wars* films, Burwell drew on familiar character themes he crafted for the first *Twilight* movie and wove them into a larger, more epic landscape for both parts of *Breaking Dawn*. His apocalyptic composition for *Part 2*'s final battle is as exhilarating as anything Williams could have produced. **Recommended listening:** *Soundtrack 1, Soundtrack 2, maybe Soundtrack 3.* -RH

Music by BEAR MCCREARY

The Walking Dead, Outlander, Agents of SHIELD, Battlestar Galactica

With an almost unerring sense of melody, arrangement, when to go the traditional orchestral route and when to break the mold



completely, McCreary's only drawback is that he's incredibly busy with his full slate of much-loved TV projects. Other than that, he's a natural successor to Williams' full-blooded symphonic sound, and is no stranger at all to the musical conventions of science fiction, but could also pick up the *Star Wars* sound and haul it into entirely new musical territory. It's something of a marvel (pun intended) that he hasn't left the small screen behind for a movie career already, and he's been able to start (and sustain) a label built entirely around releasing his TV work. His rabid fan following would probably vouch for him as well. **Recommended listening:** *Human Target*, *Agents of SHIELD*, *Battlestar Galactica Season 4*. **-EG**

Music by ALAN SILVESTRI

Back To The Future, *The Abyss*, *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*

Alan Silvestri has been a trusted ally of Robert Zemeckis in much the same way as Williams has been for Spielberg and Lucas. Try to imagine *Back To The Future* or *Forest Gump* without Silvestri's scores. They are as inseparable to the identity of those movies as the DeLorean or Gump's box of chocolates. Silvestri knows how to develop a memorable theme, and like Zemeckis' directing, his work is clean, straightforward and often free of irony, which makes it

a good fit for action-adventure and fantasy. Silvestri's work can seem a little cartoonish at times, but let's not forget the darker, more subtle contributions he's made to movies like *Castaway*, *Flight*, and *What Lies Beneath*. Silvestri has the chops to deliver a large, epic score that a *Star Wars* movie requires.

Recommended listening: *Soundtrack 1*, *Soundtrack 2*, maybe *Soundtrack 3*. **-RH**

Music by FRANK KLEPACKI

Grey Goo, *Universe At War*, *Command & Conquer*

Known primarily as a game composer, Frank Klepacki's music always has the knack of sounding like it was written for a big-screen epic, not a "mere" computer game. He's evolved from the military techno-metal of the *Command & Conquer* real-time strategy PC games to synth-orchestral (and real orchestral) epics, and he has the added advantage of having already played in the *Star Wars* universe (initially adapting and adding onto John Williams' work to create seamlessly branching music for *Star Wars: Empire At War*, and then composing new material for an expansion to that game). His music for that game project sailed through the tough approval process at Lucasfilm with no requests for revisions - surely a sign that he is the Chosen One to bring balance to the Force...or



could at least come up with some kickass music for the Chosen One. **Recommended listening:** *Universe At War: Earth Assault*, *Emperor: Battle For Dune*, *Dune 2000*. **-EG**

Music by HARALD KLOSER

The Thirteenth Floor, White House Down, 2012

I honestly had not heard of Harald Kloser until I saw *The Day After Tomorrow*. His composition for the movie's opening credits had such moving grandeur and, simultaneously, a dire foreboding that I became an instant fan. The overall score has none of composer David Arnold's frenetic bombast in *Independence Day* - another Roland Emmerich doomsday entry from eight years before. Instead, Kloser's *Tomorrow* score is appropriately darker and more subtle, and tightly threaded to inevitable climate peril than to the obvious heroic accomplishments of its characters. Kloser has been tied to a few box office duds, but he is scoring the highly anticipated sequel to *Independence Day*, due out next summer, which should elevate his stock and public appreciation. **Recommended listening:** *Soundtrack 1*, *Soundtrack 2*, maybe *Soundtrack 3*. **-RH**

Music by JOEL McNEELY

Star Wars: Shadows Of The Empire, A Million Ways To Die In The West

No stranger at all to the *Star Wars* universe, McNeely's music for the late '90s multimedia event *Shadows Of The Empire* was released on

CD and hailed as the first new *Star Wars* soundtrack in years, even though it was essentially a soundtrack to a book and a video game. It certainly showed off McNeely's considerable talent for orchestral composition and arrangement, and sounded authentically *Star Wars*. An Emmy and Grammy winner, McNeely is also no stranger to either Lucasfilm or to Disney, having worked with the latter on a number of direct-to-video animated sequels and spinoffs, and having worked with Lucas as far back as *The Radioland Murders*. He knows the parameters of the universe, he knows the business, and he undoubtedly knows how unforgiving some parts of fandom can be. **Recommended listening:** *Shadows Of The Empire*, *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. **-EG**

Music by MICHAEL GIACCHINO

Lost, Fringe, The Incredibles, Up!, Jurassic World, Tomorrowland

Michael Giacchino seems like an obvious choice and I can understand there may be some eye-rolling with this one. After all, he did score Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot, so it shouldn't come as any real surprise if he's tapped to do one of the new *Star Wars* movies. I find Giacchino to be a capable composer and he served as a suitable stand-in for Williams for *Jurassic World*. If the objective here is to find someone who can sound like Williams, then Giacchino has proven that, more or less. But let's not forget that he's an Oscar- and Golden Globe-winner for the movie *Up!*, an achievement that

was well-deserved. **Recommended listening:** *Soundtrack 1, Soundtrack 2, maybe Soundtrack 3.* **-RH**

Music by HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS

The Martian, Prometheus, X-Men Origins: Wolverine

Harry Gregson-Williams has made a big-screen splash in recent years, and his music is often one of the best things about the movies with which he's associated. He's also dipped his toes into the video game world, collaborating on high-profile scores for the *Metal Gear Solid* and *Call Of Duty* series. But the calling card that gains him admission to a galaxy far, far away may be his massive orchestral scores for the *Narnia* movies, showing he has the "epic" quality of SF/fantasy scoring in his blood, but can tell the more intimate side of the story as well. Surely he's a shoo-in - with his high profile in Hollywood, it seems like a matter not if, but when, he'll be invited into the *Star Wars* universe. **Recommended listening:** *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian.* **-EG**

Music by JAMES NEWTON HOWARD

The Sixth Sense, Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, The Hunger Games

File this one under "obvious choice"; nevertheless, I think it would be a good one. James Newton Howard is a busy man. His name is attached to *The Hunger Games, The Dark Knight*, and just about anything M. Night Shyamalan ever did (at least in Night's more profitable years). With his name on so many titles in recent years, it's easy to dismiss him as something of a hired gun. But Howard is an incredibly gifted composer, with *Alive* and *The Village* being two personal stand-outs (the latter earning an Oscar nomination). I don't think Howard's nomination for a *Star Wars* movie will cause any great tremors in the Force. It may even induce a few yawns, but at least we know we'll get quality work out of him. **Recommended listening:** *Soundtrack 1, Soundtrack 2, maybe Soundtrack 3.* **-RH**

Music by GEORGE KALLIS

Highlander: The Source, Joy Division, Screwed, Gagarin: First Into Space

One hesitates to nominate a composer on the basis of a single score, and yet that's just about the only way these Hollywood careers begin: with a single breakout, knockout musical statement that demonstrates a musician's power and understanding of how to support the material. George Kallis is virtually unknown even to soundtrack buffs, but his score to the Russian-made movie about the life of Yuri Gagarin has some of the most thrilling movie music I've heard in years. Veering effortlessly between intimate scenes and epic moments in history, the Gagarin score is a bold statement for a very real space adventure - and a showcase for someone who could bring an incredible new sound to the *Star Wars* universe that's still steeped in the orchestral and choral lexicon laid out by John Williams. Little of Kallis' music is commercially available, but with his Gagarin score as a calling card, even if he doesn't make a showing in the *Star Wars* saga, his career is almost certainly preparing for takeoff. In the words of a certain senator from Naboo, we will be watching his career with great interest. **Recommended listening:** *Gagarin: First Into Space.* **-EG**

Just as the *Star Trek* movie series began with a trendsetting, series-defining composer in Jerry Goldsmith, and then moved on through a fairly rapid succession of other musical voices, the *Star Wars* universe is about to undergo what will, at times, surely seem like a decisive, radical evolution away from its musical roots (as it explores similar territory with its narrative history). Or maybe it won't be as radical as some fans fear: many of the current crop of movie musicians followed the career path that they did precisely because they grew up with the music of John Williams. With Williams' admirers becoming his replacements, the classic sound of *Star Wars* - like the Force itself - may experience its own reawakening.