

Which composer has had the most influence on John Williams’s score for the Star Wars Saga?

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INTRODUCTION

The Star Wars saga is one of the most loved movie series in history that shaped the childhood of millions of children from many generations since 1977. One of the reasons for which it has been so successful is because of its soundtrack. From the legendary *Main Title* to the *Imperial March*, the tunes and leitmotifs John Williams composed contribute to create the magic ambience all the Star Wars fans fell in love with. However, as the famous American writer Mark Twain once said, “There is no such thing as a new idea”, and this applies also to John Williams’s score for the Star Wars saga. By listening carefully to the soundtrack of George Lucas’s works, it is possible to hear similarities with many of the most famous composers in history, such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Igor Stravinsky. Although these composers may have affected John Williams’s score, it is believed Gustav Holst could be the most significant inspiration for John Williams’s score for the Star Wars saga because of its similarity with the work *The Planets*.

Gustav Holst

Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934) was an English composer, mainly known for his seven-movement orchestral suite *The Planets* (Wikipedia, 2022). The main reason for which John Williams’s score for the soundtrack of the Star Wars saga is similar to *The Planets* is because of his orchestration technique, which can be heard especially by comparing the third movement of Holst’s suite, *Mars, the bringer of war* with the *Main Title* by John Williams. The first similarity that can be noticed is the way the melody interacts with the rhythm - both compositions are characterized by a leading melody over a very rigid rhythm, played by the timpani with the brass section, with the melody being played either by the brass section, the string section or a mixture of both. This indicated a stylistic similarity between Holst and John Williams. However, there is a specific moment in the *Main Title* which is almost identical to one in *Mars, the bringer of war* (Beato, 2016). Around four minutes and twenty seconds from the beginning of the movement, Holst’s suite reaches a climax, with the melody, played by the brass section, interacting with an ostinato (a persistently repeated motif or rhythm) played by the timpani together with brass instruments (Figure 1).



Figure 1

This ostinato is the same played at the beginning of the movement, but now Holst has proposed it in a much more powerful way.

There is a specific moment in the *Main Theme* in which John Williams presents the same ostinato, with a slight variation (Figure 2).



Figure 2

The style and orchestration of these two pieces and the rhythmic patterns in the ostinatos are remarkably similar (Beato, 2016).

There is a moment in John Williams's *Imperial Attack* from "Star Wars: A New Hope" in which it is possible to hear a clear similarity with Holst's *Mars, the bringer of war*, which is shown in Figure 3.

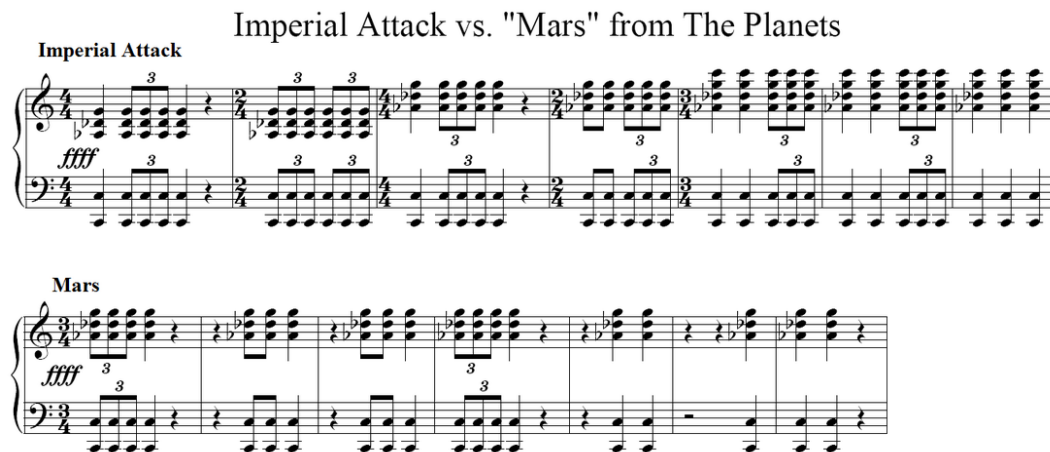


Figure 3 - Krerowicz (2013)

Both pieces use the exact same dissonant chord, a Db Lydian triad (Ab, Db, G), with a C in the bass (Beato, 2016). The rhythmic patterns are extremely similar as well, both having quarter notes following eighth notes triplets and pauses in between them, which add huge tension. The instrumentation is also the same. John Williams only adds a C above the Lydian triad in the last three bars to keep the chords building up in intensity (Krerowicz, 2013).

A third similarity between John Williams's score for Star Wars and Holst's *Mars, the bringer of war* is the use of planning (when all notes in a chord move in a parallel way) between major triads (Beato, 2016). In his orchestral suite, Holst moves between major triads with a bass D. He starts on Ab major, and moves to F major (forming a chord of Dm7 with the D on the bass) on the octave above passing through A major, Bb major, C major, D major and E major (Beato, 2016). This can often be heard in John Williams's music, who in the *Main Title* planes in a similar way (and with the same string orchestration) through the chords G major, E major, Bb major and A major (Beato, 2016) to harmonize, at the end of the theme, one of the most famous melodies of the saga, as shown in Figure 4.

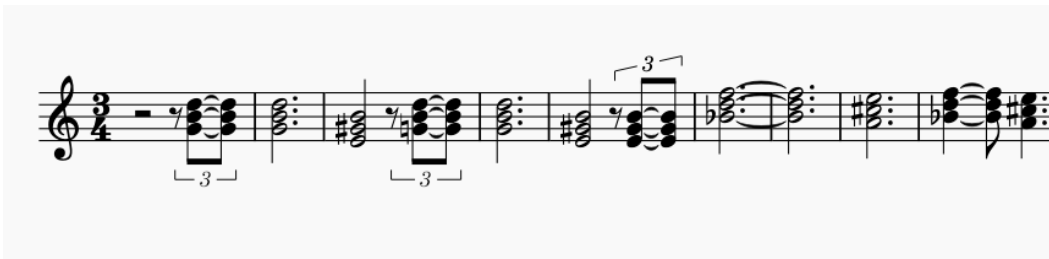


Figure 4

Igor Stravinsky

Another composer whose work is similar to John Williams's is Igor Stravinsky (1882 - 1971). This similarity can be greatly heard by comparing Stravinsky's most famous work, *The Rite of Spring* (1913) with the score for *The Dune Sea of Tatooine/Jawa Sandcrawler* (The Guitar Journal, 2019). The second part of *The Rite of Spring* begins with an ostinato consisting of an exchange between two dissonant chords, one higher in pitch than the other, played by the wind section. This pattern repeats quietly and builds up until the whole orchestra joins in. This dissonance is very unsettling and builds a lot of tension and sense of mystery.

John Williams uses the same ostinato with almost the same instrumentation in his score for *The Dune Sea of Tatooine/Jawa Sandcrawler*, which contributes to creating a mysterious atmosphere around the desert planet of Tatooine when R2D2 and C3PO first land on it. John Williams's only differences are that it is slightly higher in pitch and faster, and he adds some melody lines played by a bassoon and a piccolo. Just as in *The Rite of Spring*, also John Williams builds up on the ostinato until it is played by the whole orchestra. Following the ostinato, the English composer proposes some melodies played by wind instruments while in the background there are the double basses plucking the bass note and subsequently the rest of the strings section playing the chord. This is stylistically very similar to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, especially the part of "Ritual Action of the Ancestors" (The Guitar Journal, 2019). In the background, there are the strings playing a very similar chord as John Williams's, while the wind section plays the melody lines. The first melody of the section, which is played by an oboe, is also very similar to the theme of the Jawa Sandcrawler, still from the same part of the score, *The Dune Sea of Tatooine/Jawa Sandcrawler*.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Thirdly, Erich Wolfgang Korngold's (1897-1957) soundtrack for the 1942 movie *Kings Row* is very similar to John Williams's *Main Title*. George Lucas, in an interview with film critic Leonard Maltin, said: "I had known Steven Spielberg for a long time up to this point. And we were talking about the film real early on when I was writing the script, and I said 'I want a classical score. I want the Korngold kind of feel about this thing, it's an old-fashioned kind of movie, and I want that grand soundtrack they used to have on movies'", and that's when Spielberg recommended him to hire John Williams, who was already famous for the soundtrack of *Jaws* (Young, 2021). Therefore, it is likely that John Williams was told to get inspiration for his work from Korngold. There is a clear stylistic similarity between Korngold's soundtrack for *Kings Row* and John Williams's for the Star Wars saga, as both have a very romantic, orchestral feeling. They have rich, beautiful melodies played by strings and brass instruments that are typical of romantic composers such as Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Wagner or Brahms. Moreover, the *Main Theme*'s most famous melody, the first one that most people associate with Star Wars, is very similar to that in *Kings Row*.

Star Wars vs. King's Row



Figure 5 - (Krerowicz, 2013)

The main difference is that whereas Korngold stops on the C on the second beat of the second bar (Figure 5), John Williams continues the melody that reaches its climax on the high Bb, which is possibly what makes this melody so catchy and remarkable. In addition, John Williams ends the melody on a C, which is the 5th note of the chord of F major, Bb's (the original tonality) dominant chord. This keeps the tension up instead of closing the melody and captures the listener's attention.

Considerations

Although Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Korngold's score for *Kings Row* are clearly alike to John Williams's soundtrack for the Star Wars saga, it should be observed that there are more similarities with Holst's *The Planets*. This is due to his incredible usage of brass instruments - very similar to that in Star Wars - combined with the strong rhythms and ostinato in the background. Holst has had the ability to really give a feeling of being in outer space through his works, which Korngold and Stravinsky did not. Listeners experienced the same feeling in listening to John Williams's score for the Star Wars saga. Therefore, other than the technical similarities, there is a similarity in the overall feeling of the two composers' work that is unmatched by any other composer, including Korngold and Stravinsky.

CONCLUSION

John Williams is an extraordinary composer that shaped the concept of film music as we know it today. He developed the soundtracks of over a hundred movies, with the most famous being probably those of the Star Wars saga. Just like every composer, John Williams was influenced by others, and it is not clear who these were. However, it is possible to note similarities between his works and those of other composers, above all, Gustav Holst, Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Igor Stravinsky. It can be concluded that Gustav Holst is the composer that possibly had the most influence on John Williams's soundtrack for the Star Wars saga because of the similarity between the ostinatos of *Mars, the bringer of war* and the *Main theme*, the usage of Lydian chords to create tensions, the instrumentation, the usage of planning between major triads and mostly because of Holst's ability to create a feeling in the listener of being in outer space - which is unmatched by any other composer.

Similarities between John Williams's works and those of other composers does not absolutely take anything away from his genius. Even if, hypothetically, he did get inspiration from these composers and "borrowed" some ostinatos or themes from their works, he had the ability to adapt them to George Lucas's movies in a truly remarkable way. Moreover, choosing the correct composers to take influence from when writing the Star Wars saga's soundtrack required him to have an outstanding musical culture and the innate capacity to understand the emotions of a certain scene and convey them through music.

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