

# JOHN WILLIAMS AND THE MUSICAL AVANT-GARDE: THE SCORE FOR *WAR OF THE WORLDS*

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WHEN THINKING OF JOHN WILLIAMS, one thinks of the memorable themes and hummable melodies composed for the *Star Wars* saga created by George Lucas (1977-ongoing), *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), *E. T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), the *Indiana Jones* saga (Steven Spielberg, 1981-ongoing) — to name just the most celebrated scores. Being both supportive of the picture and enjoyable to listen to, Williams's music became a signpost not only of Hollywood film scoring, but of film music in general. Yet, in the early 2000s, particularly in Steven Spielberg's new millennial science-fiction trilogy, John Williams wrote more modernistic scores than usual.

The score for *Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001), based on a Stanley Kubrick project that Spielberg had inherited, features partly «atonal dialect and a sort of futuristic minimalism — with colouring touches of synthesizers and electric guitars»<sup>1</sup>. In *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), inspired by a Philip K. Dick short story, even more non-functional harmonic writing was present, blended with elements of old film noir music, with a special nod to Bernard Herrmann<sup>2</sup>. The third instalment of Spielberg's science fiction trilogy, *War of the Worlds* (2005) was an adaptation of the famous novel by Herbert George Wells. The score offered very few tonally stable cues and is dominated by non-functional harmonies.

Steven Spielberg noticed that:

For *War of the Worlds* John reached for something not of this earth and composed a score that you feel on your skin, even before you become aware that you are actually hearing it. He has laid down a musical foundation of atmospherics and textural events, achieving a rhythmic propulsion that is so utterly primal it crawls up inside of you and makes you wonder how one composer could make such a radical departure in style from such masterworks

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<sup>1</sup>. AUDISSINO 2014, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>. *Ibidem*, p. 218; ROSSI 2011A, p. 137.

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of melodic phrasing as the “Flying Theme” from *E.T.* to the enduring themes of *Star Wars* series and come up with a new sound that gives *War of the Worlds* much of its ultra-realism<sup>3</sup>.

#### CHANGE IN WILLIAMS’S MUSICAL LANGUAGE?

The score for *War of the Worlds* emerged from the composer’s long career, where scores written with advanced modern techniques (such as the music for Robert Altman’s 1972 film, *Images*) or composed to dodge tonality through a kind of semi-atonality (as for Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977) share room with memorable scores characterised by tonality and based on broad themes, attractive harmonic progressions and ever-interesting instrumentation. In a 1975 interview with Irwin Bazelon<sup>4</sup> Williams pointed out the composers he loved and had come to be influenced by. Beside the film composers of the classical Hollywood period, such as Alfred Newman, Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, and Bernard Herrmann, interestingly he mentioned the names of two composers who, although from different countries, both ended up in California: Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. However, they weren’t nearly as appreciated by him as Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, the prolific English composer who could write in a variety of styles, some of them being highly experimental and violent in character, such as his theatre piece *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), and some more accessible, such as his eclectic orchestral piece *St. Thomas Wake* (1969).

Despite the appreciation stated in that interview, Williams’s work has never been as radical as Davies’s. Yet, it does seem that the tone of Williams’s film scores slightly changed at the beginning of new millennium, with *Artificial Intelligence*, *Minority Report* and *War of the Worlds* becoming darker in instrumentation and harmonization, more intellectually oriented and more grasping beyond the boundaries of tonality. And during this period Williams also scored Alfonso Cuarón’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) which was ominous in tone, and not at all childish, as one would expect and anticipate from the two previous *Harry Potter* films<sup>5</sup>.

#### OUT WITH COMMERCIALISM, IN WITH CONTEMPORARY ART-MUSIC?

Williams has always accompanied his film career with a regular output for the concert stage, believing that this domain presented him with opportunities that he «wouldn’t have

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<sup>3</sup>. SPIELBERG 2005, n.p.

<sup>4</sup>. BAZELON 1975, pp. 193–206.

<sup>5</sup>. See Jamie Lynn Webster’s chapter on *Harry Potter* in this volume.

in the restricted areas of composing film music»<sup>6</sup>. Concert oeuvres offer another look at the composer's work; in these pieces he has applied his mastery to the area of art-music that most contemporary film composers avoid, because they mostly come from the world of popular music.

On the other hand, in the same interview in which he pointed out Maxwell Davies as his first-choice composer, Williams expressed some firm, even 'blasphemous' views on the usage of popular music in films. Prompted by Bazelon, who asked him about the tendency of pop forms to infiltrate films, he stated that «it is natural for pop to end up in the film»<sup>7</sup>, that «the idea of music earning money [...] is a healthy thing»<sup>8</sup> and that he didn't like to term the popular music dialect «lower art», because he believed in democracy in arts<sup>9</sup>. Commercialism of film music is not a discovery — Jerry Goldsmith, another composer Williams admired, also noticed that most film composers came from pop backgrounds, and that music can sometimes be «a completely commercial device»<sup>10</sup>. Did Williams write these different, darker film scores in the early 2000s, after thirty years of successful artistic achievements characterise by more melodic/thematic scores, to eventually move his style closer to that art-music figures he had professed his admiration for? Could this stylistic change, culminated in the music for *War of the Worlds*, be a sign of his willingness to embrace a more art-music-oriented language and depart from the commercialism of mainstream film scoring?

The score presented possibly the heaviest deviations from the composer's musical language as typically used in other films. Indeed, Williams's die-hard fans seemingly had some difficulty accepting the change. One commented that the music was an extremely difficult listen and that «only those with a true fanboy masochistic streak will be able to withstand such a continuous and ominous barrage of sci-fi dissonance»<sup>11</sup>. Others felt that the music was «unglamorous» (unlike other Williams's scores) and «merely an average background listening experience»<sup>12</sup>; one claimed that there was a surprisingly small quantity of music in the film<sup>13</sup>.

Instead, those who did not perceive dissonances as a negative listening experience — mostly music professionals — described *War of the Worlds* as the «ultimate case [where] harmonic dynamism continues to function, but, without themes, the moments of

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<sup>6</sup>. MANGAN 2005.

<sup>7</sup>. *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup>. *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>9</sup>. *Ibidem*, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup>. BAZELON 1975, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup>. MONGER 2005, online.

<sup>12</sup>. CLEMMENSEN 2005-2011.

<sup>13</sup>. «The score is striking partly as a result of how sparingly it is used. For long stretches of the movie, you hear no music at all» (SCOTT 2005). In reality, *War of the Worlds* is another extensively scored movie, as are all the Spielberg-Williams collaborations.

functional harmonies are opposed without a big contrast to the moments of non-functional harmonies»<sup>14</sup>. Scholars also emphasized the presence of «piercing dissonance, disorienting atonality, stalking rhythms, and frenetic percussions»<sup>15</sup> and concluded that the music tends to «oscillate between tonality, polytonality and atonality»<sup>16</sup>.

The film itself gained some exceptionally negative reactions, notably from renowned film critic Roger Ebert<sup>17</sup>. Ebert felt that *War of the Worlds* was «curiously rudimentary in its action»; he thought it was full of clichés, found the story unconvincing, and said the human characters were «disappointingly one-dimensional»; the alien fighting machines, the Tripods, were «designed for heavy lifting» and obviously needed «to modernize [their] equipment and techniques»; the film lacked «the zest and joyous energy we expect from Steven Spielberg [...] the sense of wonder [of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*] [...], the dazzling imagination of *Minority Report*».

General reviews of *War of the Worlds* were not as negative as Ebert's. In fact, the film was basically a commercial success, although it did not become as 'timeless' as Spielberg's earlier science-fiction films, like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or *E. T.* Unfortunately, the same has happened with its score, which soon fell into semi-obscurity.

#### FROM H. G. WELLS TO SPIELBERG

Written in 1898, Herbert George Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* became one of the most influential texts in science-fiction history. It inspired Orson Welles to broadcast his notorious 1938 radio show; it was adapted as a major film in 1953, directed by Byron Haskin; it originated two seasons of the *War of the Worlds* television series (1988–1990) and several direct-to-DVD films<sup>18</sup>; it was the basis for the animated science-fiction film *War of the Worlds: Goliath* (Joe Pearson, 2012), the Canadian/UK semi-documentary *The Great Martian War 1913-1917* (Mike Slee, 2013), and numerous comic books<sup>19</sup> and video games<sup>20</sup>. It even inspired two conceptual albums conceived by American composer Jeff Wayne: *Jeff*

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<sup>14</sup>. ROSSI 2011A, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup>. AUDISSINO 2014, p. 220.

<sup>16</sup>. ROSSI 2011A, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup>. EBERT 2005.

<sup>18</sup>. Some of these were variants of the same material shown in *H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds* directed by Timothy Hines in 2005.

<sup>19</sup>. Comic books were published by Classics Illustrated, Now-Age Illustrated, Eternity Comics, Marvel Comics, Caliber Comics, Dark Horse Comics, etc.

<sup>20</sup>. For example, *War of the Worlds*, monochrome vector arcade game created in 1982; *Jeff Wayne's The War of the Worlds*, a real-time strategy video game released for Windows-based PCs in 1998; *The War of the Worlds*, a human survival online game launched in 2005 by Paramount; *The War of the Worlds*, a 2011 single-player side-scrolling 2D action-adventure video game, etc.

*Wayne's Musical Version of the War of the Worlds* (1978) and *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds – The New Generation* (2012), which, in turn, became the basis of a stage show, a combination of live musical performances, theatre and multimedia inserts<sup>21</sup>.

The everlasting success of Wells's novel, classified at the end of nineteenth century as a 'scientific romance', was due to its merging of fantasy and realism. With the theme of the invasion from Mars<sup>22</sup> open to be interpreted as *any* invasion<sup>23</sup>, it provided an opportunity to explore human behaviour in extreme, war-like situations.

In Steven Spielberg's version of *War of the Worlds*, the story is told from the perspective of a longshoreman, Ray Ferrier. He works at the docks of Brooklyn, and lives in Bayonne, New Jersey. He is divorced and he is temporarily in care of his two children, teenage son Robbie and ten-year old daughter Rachel, while his ex-wife is off visiting her parents in Boston. Ray is estranged from his children, but this attitude gradually changes as they all learn that Earth is being attacked by ruthless alien invaders, and they have to bond in order to survive.

In his version of the story, Spielberg decided not to mention the provenance of the aliens, despite the prominence Wells had given to Martians in the science-fiction genre. Otherwise, the director tried to stay as close to the novel as possible in the context of the new political situation of the early twenty-first century, and the new locale<sup>24</sup>.

John Williams approached the scoring of the film with these peculiarities in mind. He probably also kept in mind Leith Stevens's score for the 1953 film, which was stylistically advanced for its time<sup>25</sup>. So, contrary to his more famous compositional approach and in line with the trend of contemporary film music, Williams abandoned the thematic treatment inherited from Wagnerian drama and decided to treat each scene separately, depending on its narrative content. While doing so, he maintained cohesion in his usage of intervallic and harmonic material, and developed a specific style that sounds at the verge of tonality.

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<sup>21</sup>. For more about Jeff Wayne's project, see BECK 2016, pp. 275–288.

<sup>22</sup>. Wells chose Mars, because it was scientifically reliable. By his time, people had been observing Mars through telescopes for three centuries. Also, by appearing in Wells's novel, Martians became a universal trope for aliens in the science fiction genre.

<sup>23</sup>. In Wells's case, invasion put Victorian England in jeopardy. In the cases of later adaptations of the novel, there were direct references to World War I and pre-World War II world crises (in Orson Welles's radio drama); to Cold War, notably the 1950–1953 Korean War and the Soviet Union's first hydrogen bomb test in August 1953 (in the 1953 film version); to 9/11/2001 terrorist attack, and the 2003–2011 Iraq War (in Spielberg's 2005 version).

<sup>24</sup>. Orson Welles's version moved Wells's story from Woking, London and the nineteenth century English countryside to Grover's Mill, New Jersey; the 1953 film version moved it to Linda Rosa and Los Angeles in California; Spielberg moved it to New York, New Jersey and Boston.

<sup>25</sup>. Stevens's score was based on the harmony of fourths on two tonics, taken from Joseph Schillinger's music system. For more about this score, see ROSAR 2006.



Yet the general statement that the *War of the Worlds* score lacks thematic material is not completely true. A closer listen reveals, if not full-fledged melodies, plenty of themes. There is the beautiful trumpet trio playing when Ray finds the wreckage of a Boeing 747 that crashed in front of his ex-wife's house<sup>27</sup>; the violas playing two long contrapuntal lines that express the refugees' desperation; the piano melody that accompanies the final family reunion in Boston; even the gradually accumulating string lines in a high-pitched register that accompany the horrified Rachel as she realises that there are more and more dead bodies floating in the river.

Themes, in terms of linear writing, do exist in *War of the Worlds*. The thing is that they are effectively embedded in the sound mix of the film and remain unnoticed in the background. Due to their intervallic and harmonic construction, these themes are not melodically 'pleasant' to the ear of the common listener and, contrary to Williams's trademark leitmotivic technique, they are not repeated across the film.

The harsh sound of the themes reflects the film's narrative: the characters are experiencing mortally dangerous and emotionally taxing situations, which make them re-examine their attitudes towards each other. The needs of this narrative must have led Williams to use a melodic construction unfamiliar to the wider audiences: themes appear over pedal tones, which often result in bitonality (as in the aeroplane wreckage scene and during the family reunion in Boston); or they produce dissonant counterpoint, often in the course of largely expanded tonality (as in the scene where Rachel sees dead bodies floating in the river, or in the scene where clothes fall from the sky). Nevertheless, themes also appear in the more familiar context of (mostly) minor-mode writing (for example, in the scene where Robbie drives after a stressful quarrel with his father, and the family sees lots of sorrowful refugees), and even acquire a memorable march-like quality at the end of the film (as in the scene of the final return to Boston, where Ray notices that the alien red weeds are dead and that the Tripod acts oddly and seemingly sickly<sup>28</sup>).

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<sup>27</sup>. As stated in BOUZEREAU 2005, the trumpet trio was previously written for the "Epilogue" cue, and was moved by Spielberg to the aeroplane wreckage scene. It also plays over the film's end credits. This melody stands out not because it openly uses thirds (above the pedal tone, which is also a minor third), but because it comes after several tense action cues ("Intersection Scene", "Escape from the City"). Broadly looking, it sounds like a military trumpet honouring the victims of the (terrorist, Second World-, alien...) war. Namely, apart from being an obvious reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the scene also refers to Orson Welles's radio show where fighter planes succeed in taking down a Martian tripod through a kamikaze attack (INGVARSSON 2013, p. 275).

<sup>28</sup>. The march-like quality in the victorious part of the "Return to Boston" sequence doesn't lead anywhere, though. Williams composed it to signify a victory with some reservations. By doing this, he grouped the cue with other musical cues at the end of a film which point to the 'fake happy ending' as also seen in the original Wells novel (the cue "Reunion in Boston", similarly composed 'with reservation', is analysed in ROSSI 2011B, pp. 186-188).

Contrary to the general, superficial opinion, the score of *War of the Worlds* is rich in themes. What it lacks is not themes, but repetitions of melodies representing the film's characters, i.e. leitmotifs. This lack of leitmotifs could have been an anomaly in the film scores of the 1930s, 1940s, and even the late 1970s and 1980s, when Williams revived the classical Hollywood music style «almost single-handedly»<sup>29</sup>. Yet in 2005, when the simplification of film music due to the development of digital technology had already started, this was not the case<sup>30</sup>.

#### OMINOUS TIMBRES OF THE ALIEN INVASION

Orchestral colours are of utmost importance to Williams. In the score to *War of the Worlds* the timbre of different instrumental combinations comes to the fore, surpassing the importance of themes and motifs. Williams uses a standard symphony orchestra, but enhanced for the purposes of the science-fiction genre. In the prologue and epilogue, where the world of the microscopic beings is shown to be as important as the whole universe, we can specifically hear a luminous, ethereal sound produced by synthesizers. In “The Intersection Scene”, where the alien machine emerges from the ground and starts attacking humans, synthesizers are paired with women's voices. Together, they create the eerie effect of the human bodies being vaporised (the voices slide from cluster to cluster, mostly using their breath, producing a sound somewhere between the vowels ‘a’ and ‘e’).

Aliens are accompanied by a whole array of sounds, some of them produced by the sound effects department<sup>31</sup>. Most of the other sounds were instead created by carefully planned instrumental pairings, but also with specific chords and clusters to evoke an otherworldly, aggressive, and outlandish atmosphere. For example, in “The Ferry scene”, where Tripods attack the crowd which desperately tries to get on board, Williams uses male voices, in an extremely low register, sounding threatening, but at the same time almost like the ‘ohm’ as sung by Tibetan monks<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup>. AUDISSINO 2014, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup>. On film music in the time of digital film-making, see VERNALLIS 2013. For more about Williams's music in the digital era see AUDISSINO 2017.

<sup>31</sup>. The cry of the Tripods, first heard in “The Intersection Scene”, although containing recognizable tones (which include minor third, an interval Williams often exploits), is a sound effect, not composed music. Nevertheless, Williams organizes orchestra around the “Tripod Sound”, preparing carefully its first, and other sinister appearances (like in “The Ferry Sequence”), mostly by silencing the orchestra before a “Tripod Sound”, and unleashing the music afterwards. As said before, Tripods are associated with an array of sounds: except for the sounds of their movement being mimicked by the orchestra, there are mechanical sounds (especially prominent in the scene set in the deserted countryside and heard from Ogilvy's basement, and in “The Basket Scene”). It seems that these sounds were inspired by the novel itself, since Wells described Tripods as perpetually crying an alternation of two notes, «ulla, ulla, ulla» (WELLS 2011, pp. 266-270).

<sup>32</sup>. Williams in BOUZEREAU 2005.

The voices in the score (especially male ones) are infrequent and mostly have a mere colouring function. More important are the brass instruments — horns and trombones specifically, which (sometimes reinforced by trumpets) produce the trebling, threatening, pulsating, violently accentuated flutter noise that is often prominent in the action scenes with the alien Tripods. Woodwinds, particularly those with a bright timbre like flutes and oboes, are much less used<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, bass clarinet has an important role as the ‘sound’ of the alien probe and of other sinister situations in Harlan Ogilvy’s basement in the second part of the film<sup>34</sup>.

The overall sound of the film is dark, ominous and somewhat pessimistic; the string section is led by violas, not by violins, to materialise a darker sound more appropriate to this apparently hopeless story. Williams relies more on combinations of instruments rather than individual voices. He often divides the melodic line among different instrument groupings of similar colour, as happens in the aforementioned scene of Ray and Robbie’s conversation in the street. Another example is a quotation of the “Dies Irae” motif in the “Return to Boston” cue, where the medieval “Day of Wrath” motif is passed around — alternatively — among horns, cellos and contrabasses<sup>35</sup>.

Percussion instruments have a central role, but Williams provides rhythm patterns and driving pulse through the whole orchestra as well. Percussion, generally timpani and bass drum, provide the basis which is coloured by orchestral instruments, including strings and winds, synthesizer and piano. Its most prominent use is in the scene where Ogilvy is killed, with Rachel singing “Hushabye Mountain” over wildly aggressive orchestral punches created by various — pitched and non-pitched — instruments. The sounding metal reverberation that can be heard after the killing is over comes from the piano. It is important to note that the whole scene, with the camera staying on Rachel’s face as close as possible while the killing takes place offscreen, wouldn’t have worked this effectively if the music had not so tangibly and vividly illustrated the events we are not allowed to see.

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<sup>33</sup>. Piccolo flutes and other bright-coloured instruments stand out in the high-pitch chord that intensifies Rachel’s screaming when she is spotted by the Tripod at the small hill overgrown with the alien red weed.

<sup>34</sup>. The strange character of Harlan Ogilvy, masterfully played by Tim Robbins, was created as a combination of three different characters from Wells’s original story. These were the astronomer Ogilvy who dies at the very beginning of the novel; the artilleryman who boasted many pieces of advice about how to defeat Martians but was too passive to act; and the curate who was specifically disliked by the narrator, reflecting Wells’s own attitude towards religion.

<sup>35</sup>. There is another musical quotation in *War of the Worlds*. In the scene where the flabby three-fingered hand of the alien falls out from the open Tripod, Williams cites Max Steiner’s *King Kong* motif from the 1933 movie, played by horns. There is a parallel in the downfall of the monster(s) in both stories; also, this was the occasion for Williams to give a nod of admiration to one of his predecessors from the classical Hollywood era.

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REACHING OUT OF TONALITY

At the very beginning of *War of the Worlds*, Spielberg uses, twice, a device that can be very effective in sound films: the complete absence of sound. It first occurs after the abnormal storm that terrified everyone (Ray and Rachel hid under the table). Its second occurrence is after the Tripod has emerged from under the ground: people (including Ray) gather to look at the alien machine with curiosity, as the machine is looking at them in turn. Then, the machine releases a strange sound (the cry of the Tripod) and it starts to move in order to attack. We hear mechanically rhythmic sounds, pulsating and persistent, and we might think that they come from the Tripod. But they come from the musical score — see Ex. 2 and Ex. 3. Set in triple meter, and coloured with the dark tones of the trombones and other wind instruments doubled by the piano, the sound for the Tripod's walk brings to the fore interesting chord combinations. It is an alternation of D-F $\sharp$ /B $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -G $\flat$ , and E $\flat$ -G/A-D, before it changes position to G-B/E $\flat$ -G $\flat$ -B $\flat$ , alternating with A-C $\sharp$ /D-F.

Ex. 2: transcription of John Williams, “The Tripod's Walking Motif” (tentative title) from the *War of the Worlds* film score (© 2005 BMI), published by Songs of SKG, ear transcription of the film's soundtrack. Used in compliance with the U.S. Copyright Act, Section 107.



Ex. 3: transcription of John Williams, “The Tripod's Walking Motif, second version” (tentative title) from the *War of the Worlds* film score (© 2005 BMI), published by Songs of SKG, ear transcription of the film's soundtrack. Used in compliance with the U.S. Copyright Act, Section 107.



The first structure suggests bitonal combination of D major/E $\flat$  minor and E $\flat$  major/D minor; but it could be also read as two variants of the same chord, the first being a (minor) ninth chord, and the second a (major incomplete) eleventh chord, both rooted on the note E $\flat$ . Another position of the chords suggests G major/E $\flat$  minor and A major/D minor combinations, but both could be read differently, mainly as ‘normal’ chords. The first is a

kind of ‘tonal cluster’ containing simultaneously two minor thirds (E<sub>b</sub>-G<sub>b</sub> and G-B<sub>b</sub>) and two major thirds (E<sub>b</sub>-G and G-B) in a vertical structure, E<sub>b</sub>-G<sub>b</sub>-G-B<sub>b</sub>-B, indicating all types of triad, again rooted on the note E<sub>b</sub>. The second one is a minor seventh chord rooted on D (D-F-A-C<sub>♯</sub>).

This kind of bitonal writing, put in a context that conveys a rhythmically strong impetus with an emphasis on tone colour — with the idea of creating a kind of orchestral ‘noise’ — recalls Igor Stravinsky’s writing in the *Rite of Spring* (1913). Consider Stravinsky’s ‘Les Augures’ chord, transcribed in Ex. 4.

Ex. 4: transcription of Igor Stravinsky, ‘Les Augures’ chord from the *Rite of the Spring* score (1967) printed by Dover Publications, 1989. Used in compliance with the U.S. Copyright Act, Section 107.



This chord oscillates between the first inversion of dominant seventh chord in the (possible) tonality of A-flat and a F<sub>b</sub>-major triad, bringing together tones of two chords, one rooted on the note E<sub>b</sub> and the other one rooted on the E in the bass, so close that they almost resemble a twelve-tone row (the bitonal combination in “Les augures printaniers” can be also seen as a thirteenth chord rooted on the fundamental tone E<sub>b</sub>, an interpretation which is also possible in the case of Williams’s chords). Daniel Chua stated that Stravinsky «fine-tuned» the chord to achieve «tonal noise» that is rhythmically oriented and, through many repetitions and different accentuation, impulse-driven<sup>36</sup>.

The same could be said about Williams’s chords: they are sometimes evidently set in a bitonal context that clashes to our ears, especially when organised in certain (often changing, often asymmetric) meters and enriched with accents that fall on and off the beat. Apart from the scene where the Tripods show their destructive power for the first time, this type of writing can be detected in other action cues. Some examples: the scene where Ray escapes with Robbie and Rachel in the back seat of a stolen car; the scene where the Tripods attack the ferry overloaded with people; the silent fight between Ray and Ogilvy while the aliens search Ogilvy’s basement; and the scene where Rachel and Ray are captured with other people in a Tripod’s gigantic basket.

Chords are on the verge of becoming clusters, and some clusters used here emerge directly from chords. They are mostly small in scale: some of them contain third(s); some of them are built from the tones of a diatonic tetrachord, or from the motifs already applied horizontally. Therefore, clusters in Williams’s writing are put in a tonal (mostly

<sup>36</sup>. CHUA 2007, p. 77.

minor) context<sup>37</sup> and they tend to sound tonal even when they produce sinister sounds, pounding rhythms or eerie effects. Williams sometimes uses chords which come in bitonal combinations, while at other times he uses quartal harmonies (often inserting tritone among perfect fourths), which makes the diversity of his chord-building techniques exceptionally wide.

Although the *War of the Worlds* score is often described as «mostly atonal» and «tough to listen to», when closely analysed it reveals that true atonality is used only rarely. Williams rather writes in some kind of ‘semi-tonality’: the strong points of tonality are weakened by a pandiatonic approach, by the use of altered chords, unsolved dissonances, chromaticism and clusters. The free floating of the musical discourse from one tonal centre to another enables modulation to become a natural and constant event.

As the story progresses and the alien invasion seems to leave no hope to the human kind, Williams’s writing becomes denser and denser. But atonal writing proper, in the sense of the adoption of twelve-tone rows or serial technique, remains extremely rare. Twelve-tone rows are hard to detect by ear<sup>38</sup>, but it seems that they are employed in the scene in Ogilvy’s basement, where Harlan Ogilvy, citing Wells, compares the war between aliens and men with the war between men and maggots. One can also discern a rigid control of dynamics borrowed from serialism in the scene where Rachel, spotted by a Tripod, screams. There is a strong accent on the appearance of the quartal chord that emphasizes her scream, followed by sudden *piano*. There are also examples of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, since Williams at times gradually changes the instrumental colour of the cluster in use (for example, in the scene where Ray searches for Rachel in Ogilvy’s house in panic, assuming she has been abducted or killed by aliens): clusters for high-register strings rapidly change colour with the addition of low-register strings and then brass.

## CONCLUSION

The music for *War of the Worlds* can’t be compared to Maxwell Davies’s, but it could be to Igor Stravinsky’s and — to some extent — Arnold Schoenberg’s. However, by 2005, their techniques — including the usage of bitonality, twelve tone rows, *Klangfarbenmelodie*, serialism and even quarter-tone music (all used sporadically in *War of the Worlds*, with the latter technique mentioned above used possibly for the gliding female voices in the scene of the Tripods evaporating human bodies) — were almost a hundred years old. The compositional techniques used in *War of the Worlds* were not at all new or modern; they were just not commonly used in films. Their more frequent usage in Williams’s works in the early 2000s, with the peak reached in *War of the Worlds*, may reflect the composer’s

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<sup>37</sup>. The only chord that clearly sounds like a major chord appears at the end of the movie.

<sup>38</sup>. Since the orchestral score of *War of the Worlds* is not available, all analyses have been done by ear.

maturity and his willingness to expand the musical vocabulary. Yet, these ‘modernistic’ musical devices applied to the *War of the Worlds* score were all prompted by the film’s story. Williams used twelve-tone rows because of Ogilvy’s mental state; his usage of serial technique and *Klangfarbenmelodie* were triggered by Rachel’s horror and Ray’s panic about the idea that he might have lost his daughter forever. Since there is lots of music in the film, with many different compositional techniques, much of it escapes memorisation because of its lack of melodic traits. In Williams’s musical language all decisions follow the film’s story: themes and leitmotifs, orchestration and dynamics, the usage of rhythm and meter, the shaping of chords and clusters, one compositional technique over another, the specific musical form of a cue... And these elements combine and support each other in a savvy musical composition put in the service of the events shown on the screen. The old principle of film music’s inaudibility is brought to perfection — the viewer is not aware of synch points or mickey-mousing effects used in a sophisticated manner throughout the film<sup>39</sup>. At first, the score to *War of the Worlds* might sound unusually radical and experimental within the Williams canon. But a closer listen of the score *within* the film, brings only one conclusion to the fore: Williams did not really depart from his style just for the sake of experimentation, in order to pursue a more contemporary art-music sound. He employed more modernistic devices in *War of the Worlds* because the film required them. *War of the Worlds* was just *one* among other film assignments he worked on in 2005. In the same year, he composed the scores to Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* and Rob Marshall’s *Memoirs of Geisha* — receiving his 44<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Academy Award nominations — and he also scored the sixth instalment of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* Saga, *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. Those four film 2005 scores couldn’t be more different, and aptly reflect the variety of idioms of the twenty-first century classical and non-classical music, all of which are part of Williams’s compositional toolkit. And the scores composed after 2005, like *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008), *The Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011), *War Horse* (Steven Spielberg, 2011) or *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013) do not show a radical re-orientation in Williams’s writing. He has continued to put all his energy, skills, experience and invention to write the type of film music that serves the story of the film at hand. Thus, far from being an anomaly or a sign of discontent for the film-scoring craft, the *War of the Worlds* score is the affirmation of the composer’s absolute dedication to film and scoring. With its combination of carefully chosen art-music techniques and their thoughtful application to the context of the film’s narrative, *War of the Worlds* is one of John Williams’s finest works, an example of both his musical versatility and his dramaturgical acumen.

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<sup>39</sup>. The most prominent example of the usage of the mickey-mousing technique is the scene where alien probe searches for humans in Ogilvy’s basement. Music is formed out of symmetrically built phrases, but the viewer is not aware of the symmetry — he feels only tension.

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