

## J Williams: ‘Main title/rebel blockade runner’ (from the soundtrack to *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope*) (for component 3: Appraising)

### Background information and performance circumstances

**John Williams** (born 1932) is widely considered to be one of the greatest film composers of all time. His scores have been nominated for many awards, and he has (so far) won no less than five Academy Awards (Oscars). He has collaborated with some of the greatest directors (Steven Spielberg, George Lucas) on many iconic films (*Jaws*, the *Star Wars* series, the *Indian Jones* series, *Schindler’s List*, three *Harry Potter* films and *Jurassic Park*).

Williams revitalised and re-popularised the use of grand late Romantic orchestral 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 19th-century approach to melody, harmony and orchestration at the root of his musical style.

In particular, Williams used the Romantic device, pioneered by Richard Wagner in his operas, of leitmotif – where a character or idea is represented by the same musical idea whenever they appear or are mentioned. The opening theme of the ‘Main Title/Rebel Blockade Runner’, for example, is associated with Luke Skywalker, and with ideas of heroism and struggle.

It is common for film composers to employ orchestrators (people who distribute the composer’s melodies and harmonies around the instruments of the orchestra) and in this case Herbert Spencer was responsible for the detailed scoring, under supervision from John Williams.

### Performing forces and their handling

- ‘Main Title/Rebel Blockade Runner’ uses a full symphony orchestra (an ensemble which had developed during the 19th century and which, by the early 20th century, often included upwards of 60 players across the four sections – strings, woodwind, brass and percussion):
  - 3 flutes (third also playing piccolo) 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons
  - 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba
  - timpani, triangle, snare drum, tam-tam, glockenspiel, vibraphone and cymbals
  - piano/celeste and harp
  - strings.
- Traditional symphonic/Romantic treatment of the orchestra with much doubling of parts

(more than one instrument playing a particular idea at once, sometimes an octave or more apart).

- Relatively few uses of solo timbres or lighter textures – mostly quite thickly scored.
- Williams avoids the use of any electronic effects or of synthesisers in this score – a surprising decision perhaps, particularly in the late 1970s, when such technology was so important in popular music, and had been used in many film scores, especially those with a futuristic theme.

Bars 1–3	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominated by <b>fanfare-like figures</b> in the brass. Rapid repeated notes develop quickly into staccato triplet figures, with free <b>imitation</b> between trombones and trumpets</li> <li>• <b>Inverted tonic pedal</b> played <b>tremolando</b> in the violins</li> <li>• In <b>quadruple</b> time</li> <li>• Played <b>ff</b></li> </ul>
Bars 4–7	Main theme (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heroic <b>leitmotif/main theme</b>, played by high trumpets</li> <li>• Punctuating <b>syncopated</b> (off-beat) chords in brass/lower strings/bassoons with rhythm emphasised by snare drum</li> <li>• Upper woodwind and violins play <b>tremolando</b> chords and continue inverted tonic pedal from Introduction</li> <li>• Played <b>ff</b></li> </ul>
Bars 8–11 <sup>3</sup>	Main theme repeated (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trumpets play melody again</li> <li>• Inverted tonic pedal idea varied by semiquaver <b>lower auxiliary</b> figure on alternate beats</li> <li>• Accompaniment changed slightly to allow a descending bass</li> </ul>
Bars 11 <sup>4</sup> –20	Contrasting section (B)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contrasting melody played by all strings apart from double basses – doubled across three <b>octaves</b></li> <li>• Important notes of the melody picked out in the <b>glockenspiel</b></li> <li>• Accompanying block chords in horns/piano (lh)/oboe</li> <li>• Harmony reinforced by <b>triplet</b> figures in piano (rh)/harp/flute/clarinet</li> <li>• Bars 12–15 <b>dominant pedal</b> in bass instruments</li> <li>• Played <b>mf</b></li> </ul>
Bars 21–29	Main theme (A) played twice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Melody doubled across three octaves in violin/viola/cello/horn/trumpet</li> <li>• ‘Rushing’ upwards scale-like passages in</li> </ul>

		<p><b>woodwind</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Punctuating <b>syncopated</b> (off-beat) chords similar to those in bars 4–7</li> <li>• Harp <b>glissando</b> at bar 29 provides an effective link to next section</li> <li>• Played <b>ff</b></li> </ul>
Bars 30–32	Link	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fanfare-like material, related to the Introduction, building up a chord using repeated quaver/triplet semiquaver rhythm</li> <li>• Rapid ascending (rising) <b>sequential</b> figures in strings/bassoons/flutes</li> </ul>
Bars 33–35	Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strange, unstable harmonies sustained by brass and woodwind</li> <li>• Rapid <b>arpeggio</b> (broken chord) figures in strings</li> <li>• General <b>diminuendo</b> (lessening of volume)</li> </ul>
Bars 36–38	Star-filled sky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much lighter texture – played <b>p</b> at first</li> <li>• <b>Piccolo</b> melody accompanied by held chords/arpeggios in woodwind/vibraphone/harp/celeste/violin</li> </ul>
Bars 39–41	Appearance of planets and increase in tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scurrying upward figures in strings</li> <li>• Block chords build up and <b>crescendo</b> (increase in volume) in trombones and horns</li> </ul>
Bars 42–43	Spaceship appears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low C pedal played <b>ff</b> by bass instruments and accompanied by huge <b>Tam-tam</b> (gong) stroke</li> <li>• Timpani hammers out an ominous rhythm</li> <li>• Brass play <b>two chordal figures</b> which represent the Imperial forces</li> </ul>
Bars 44–50	Larger spaceship in pursuit firing at the first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dissonant</b> (clashing) chords, played in rhythmic unison, across the orchestra</li> <li>• <b>ff</b></li> <li>• <b>Ritardando</b> (slowing down) and a <b>pause</b> emphasise effect here</li> <li>• Change to <b>triple time</b></li> </ul>
Bars 51–60	Battle continues and action then switches to inside the rebel craft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast tempo</li> <li>• Strings/lower brass and woodwind play an <b>ostinato</b> figure on the note C</li> <li>• Brass and upper woodwind play dramatic triads, similar to those heard in bars 42–43, to accompany shots of the Imperial forces</li> <li>• The sustained low C fades away in cello/bass/bass clarinet as the cue ends</li> </ul>

## Texture

- This extract is dominated by various types of **homophonic** (tune and accompaniment) texture:
  - Both the main theme A and its contrasting melody B are largely accompanied by block chords, arpeggios or rhythmic articulations of chords.
  - From bar 4 onwards the texture is mostly melody-dominated homophony, with the (often) octave doubled tune supported by block or articulated chords.
- For more details of the variety of orchestral textures used in this extract see Performing forces table (above).
- A variety of **pedal textures** are used in this extract:
  - Inverted tonic pedal in the Introduction and during the first playing of the 'Main Title/Rebel Blockade Runner' theme.
  - **Dominant pedal** at bars 12–15.
- **Ostinato** textures 51–60.

## Structure

- The structure of this extract is intended to match and reinforce the opening section of the film.

1–3	Introduction	'Star Wars' logo appears
4–7	Main theme (A)	'Crawling' text moves across the screen, setting the scene for the film
8–11 <sup>3</sup>	Main theme repeated (A)	'Crawling' text moves across the screen, setting the scene for the film
11 <sup>4</sup> –20	Contrasting section (B)	'Crawling' text moves across the screen, setting the scene for the film
21–29	Main theme (A) played twice	'Crawling' text moves across the screen, setting the scene for the film
30–38		A black screen is revealed as star-filled space
39–41		The camera pans downwards, revealing two planets, and then a third
42–43		A spaceship comes into view
44–50		Pursued and attacked by a much larger craft
51–60		Action switches to the inside of the Rebel craft

- The main theme section (bars 1–29) follows a conventional pattern, in which regular four-bar phrases are used to construct a longer musical structure with an AABA shape. This is a **musical** shape.
- The remainder of the extract takes its shape from the **narrative/action** on the screen and so has less of a purely musical structure.

## Tonality

- This extract is in a clear B  $\flat$  major for the first 29 bars.
- From bar 30 onwards the tonality becomes less clear, with more unstable harmonies and progressions.
- The music from bar 30 onwards is more based around the note C, often heard as a bass pedal.
- More complex chords and much **dissonance** make some of the passage at bars 41–60 almost **atonal** (without key) at times and the passage at bars 51–60 combines elements of **bitonality** (two keys at once).

## Harmony

- The harmony is predominantly **tonal** (based around a key note and its scale), but does not always use chords I, IV and V in conventional progressions, such as cadences.
- 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.
- More complex chords and progressions are used:
  - The harmonies of the opening fanfare are use chords built up of fourths, rather than thirds – this is called **quartal harmony**.
  - In bars 4–7 almost half the chords use **quartal harmony** – usually where chord V might otherwise have been used.
  - The end of the first phrase in the A section (bar 7) features an **imperfect cadence** – a progression landing on the **dominant chord (V)**. However, the three chords that precede chord V move in parallel motion by semitone steps and the A  $\flat$  major chord immediately before the F major dominant is not a chord within B  $\flat$  major: this chord moves by a **third** downwards to the F major chord. (Most cadence progressions move by fourths or fifths.)
  - Another ‘foreign’ chord can be found at bar 15 beat 1, where a D  $\flat$  major chord moves to F major, this time by **rising** a third (**tertiary relationship**).
  - The harmonies in bars 33, 34 and 35 mix elements of different chords simultaneously to produce strange, unstable effects. For example, bar 33 mixes elements from C major and D  $\flat$  major.
  - Bars 36–38 uses a C major chord ‘inflected’ by notes from C minor – an A  $\flat$ , and, in the piccolo melody, a B  $\flat$ . This produces a rich, vibrant effect.
  - Bars 39–41 the strings and brass are in different keys, the overall effect being almost **atonal**.
  - At bar 44, the hammered unison chords are **dissonant** (clashing), with strong clashes between the two pairs of notes used – C/D  $\flat$  and F/G. This type of closely spaced chord is called a **cluster**.
  - Use of **tritone (augmented fourth/diminished fifth)** in bar 44 – G–D  $\flat$ .
  - The chords played above the pulsating ostinato C from bar 51 are again from a different key – first D  $\flat$  major and later F  $\flat$  (E) major.

## Melody

- Williams' melodies are memorable, and are an important factor in the success of his scores.
- The **opening three bars** use a combination of gestures commonly associated with fanfares:
  - Rapid repeated notes, on the tonic, B ♭.
  - Triplet arpeggio-like figures – but based around leaps of a fourth, rather than thirds.
  - The notes F, B ♭ and E ♭ feature most prominently here, with the addition of A ♭ in horn and tuba. (This four note chord (F B ♭ E ♭ A ♭) is used in the harmonisation of the 'Main Title' theme that follows.)
  - The trumpet idea in bars 2 and 3 also features the leap of a (minor) **seventh**, from F to E ♭, an interval that also features prominently in the **main theme (A)**.
- The **'Main Title/Rebel Blockade Runner' theme** is made up of two ideas:
  - **Main theme (A)** is one of the most well-known themes in recent movie history.
  - It consists of a **four-bar** idea, which is repeated to form an eight-bar phrase.
  - As with most successful melodies, it uses a careful balance of **stepwise** motion and **leaps**.
  - The first bar contains a **rising perfect fifth** idea, from **tonic** to **dominant** notes, which immediately creates a heroic feel, appropriate to the character of Luke Skywalker, and to the struggle of the rebels. (Williams also uses a prominent rising fifth at the beginning of the 'Flying Theme' from *ET*.)
  - The second and third bars are identical, with the most prominent feature being the leap of a **minor seventh** onto the B ♭ on beat two. The falling fourth from beat two to four contains the same two notes (B ♭ and F) as the first bar, but moving downwards in an **inversion**.
  - The fourth bar uses an **auxiliary** figure to reach the **supertonic** (second note of the scale) C, which prepares for the repeat of the idea.
  - The second, third and fourth bars are all based on the same rhythm, with the combination of triplet quavers to create excitement and the tied minim across beats two and three to create tension.
  - **Main theme (B)** is again a four-bar idea, which is repeated slightly altered and extended on the second playing. It has a less forceful character and provides an effective contrast.
  - **(B)** begins with an **anacrusis** (upbeat) figure heard first on the last beat of bar 11.
  - Although there is much more stepwise movement in this idea, it still has a **rising sixth**, which appears in bars 12 and 14.
  - Triplet figures in bar 13 remind the listener of (A), as does the downward fourth in bar 15 (F–C).
  - On the repeat of (B) bars 18 and 19 are changed by the use of a downward B ♭ minor melodic scale and by extending the final dominant F to last two bars.
  - In bar 18 notice how the outer parts move in **contrary motion** (opposite directions).
- The rest of the extract is more concerned with harmony, orchestral textures and rhythm than with statements of real melodic interest. Nonetheless, there are melodic features worth noting:
  - The brief piccolo idea at bars 36–39.
  - The way in which Williams uses a rising and falling **minor third** in the chordal material during bars 51–60.
  - The use of **sequence** (the same basic shape/rhythm repeated starting on a higher or lower note) – for example, in the string parts in bar 32.

## Tempo, metre and rhythm

- The fast tempo chosen for the opening section of this extract matches the mood and genre of the film – this is mainly an exciting action movie and the tempo reflects this.
- The 4/4 metre and the march style also reflect the ‘military’ nature of the wars between the rebels and the Imperial forces.
- The opening three bars use rhythmic gestures typically found in fanfares – rapid repeated notes and triplets – to create a real feeling of expectation.
- The rhythmic feel of the main theme section supports the strong quadruple/duple pulse, continuing to include the triplets first heard in the Introduction.
- The main theme (A) is often accompanied by syncopated block chords, mixing off-beat quaver and triplet quavers with frequent rests.
- From bar 33 onwards the rhythmic feel changes entirely, as the pulse becomes much less obvious.
- The metre changes to triple time at bar 44.
- The **homorhythmic** (rhythmic unison) chords at bars 44–50 create drama by mixing quavers, triplet quavers and crotchets with well-placed rests. The tempo also slows down here, further increasing the effect of these chords. (This passage is very reminiscent of a section of ‘Mars’ from Gustav Holst’s *Planets Suite*.)
- At 51 the music sets off furiously, at a very fast tempo, with a one-bar ostinato figure (‘Mars’ again) driving the extract to its conclusion.