

John Williams and Anne-Sophie Mutter discuss *Across the Stars*

ASM: John, I have to say, I'm more nervous about interviewing you than I was when I first played for Herbert von Karajan! It's such an honour, because I first came across your music in 1978 when I saw *Star Wars*. That epic score opened up a new dimension for me. Your music became part of my life, but I never imagined our paths would cross.

JW: So how, when and why did you get the idea for *Across the Stars*?

ASM: Well, if you remember, we did finally meet, some eight years ago, and I asked if you might write a short piece for me, and you composed the wonderful *Markings*, which I premiered in Tanglewood a few years ago.

JW: Getting to know you musically was so inspirational for me, and then you suggested this project...

ASM: Every time I went to one of your films I used to wish I could play these amazing themes, and so I asked you, and now I have your wonderful translations of them for violin.

JW: Yes, they're adaptations rather than arrangements, because they started out as short musical phrases associated with characters such as Yoda, Leia, and so on. So the challenge was turning perhaps four bars into four minutes, separate from the movie, finding the right register on the violin and a shape for each piece.

ASM: I think that's why *Star Wars* is such a big part of this album, because there are so many distinctive characters and your themes bring them to life. Take "**Luke and Leia**", for example, you picture them as soon as you hear the music. Or that fabulous theme for Rey, the first female Jedi, which is playful and innocent, but also very strong. How hard is it to take something you've written for one particular instrument and adapt it for the violin?

JW: Firstly, it's an honour to write for such a great violinist, and then if you take something written originally for horn, for example, and transpose it, the music becomes a different emotional experience. And that's true of the whole project – I've been taking music I've known for years and translating it into something violinistic. The theme from *Far and Away*, say, which is all orchestra, trumpets and this and that, and I've tried to make it "friendly" for the violin.

ASM: And you've created a virtuosic piece which is extremely violinistic, as is "**The Duel**" from *Tintin*, which is a Paganini-esque excursion into the world of firecrackers. And then there's the iconic "**Hedwig**" theme.

JW: Well I wrote that before I'd even seen a raw cut of the first film. I knew what the books were about, and I wrote this piece for a TV promotion, then everyone at Warner Bros. said it should be the theme for the film. But what you do with it on the violin, without vibrato – the word I'd use to describe it is "spidery". Not frightening, exactly, but atmospheric. Virtuosic and brilliant.

ASM: Moving on to some of the other pieces, I'd love to understand how you get the feel of all these different cultural backgrounds. There's the Celtic music in *Far and Away*, or the Japanese in *Geisha*. How, within a few bars, do you make us feel we're in Japan?

JW: In the 1960s I was part of the music department here at Universal Studios. I used to do weekly anthology programmes, each one in a different style, so that gave me experience in exploring all kinds of music. The first time I wrote some Japanese music was for the film *None But the Brave* directed by Frank Sinatra. I met some amazing Japanese musicians and learned about their traditional instruments, so that prepared me for *Memoirs of a Geisha* too. There I used solo cello, but I think the Japanese characteristics translate into the violin version as well.

ASM: Then we come to *Dracula*! I think André [Previn] played a part here – you and he were friends from your teenage years, weren't you?

JW: Very good friends, that's right. And yes, when we talked about this project, he reminded me of "**Night Journeys**", which he loved. And I thought it could work well on the violin.

ASM: It's such dark music, so passionate and wonderful. And your orchestration is really sublime. Equally unique is the theme from *Cinderella Liberty*, which has this jazzy, improvisatory feel. Can you tell us how it came about?

JW: *Cinderella Liberty*, was a wonderful film with a sort of smoky, bar-like atmosphere. The theme was an improvisation – I sat at the piano and noodled around, played a kind of jazz thing.

ASM: It has a melancholy atmosphere that creates a perfect contrast with the more "heroic" feel of the *Star Wars* themes and "*The Duel*" and *Harry Potter*. And there's "**Sabrina's Theme**", which is another great female tune, but so different from *Geisha*. It's wonderful to have such a wide range of music on one album, and of course we end with the theme from *Schindler's List*, which really has to have the final word. Your music makes us remember such horrors so we won't repeat them. That's a sombre note to end on, but a necessary one.

JW: It's a beautiful note to end on.

ASM: Thank you for your wonderful music, John!

JW: And thank you for bringing new life to these pieces – a new point of view, a new way of hearing them, a new way of revealing whatever is in them.