



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## MOVIES: A "Close Encounter" With A Steven Spielberg/John Williams Classic

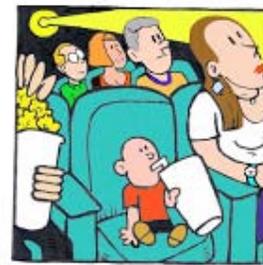
**THE ART OF THE SCORE: NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC  
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND \*\*\* 1/2**  
CONDUCTOR: RICHARD KAUFMAN  
DAVID GEFFEN HALL AT LINCOLN CENTER

Director Steven Spielberg has made about 32 feature films. (I'm counting his upcoming remake of *West Side Story*.) But one of them is unique. 1977's *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* is the only film solely written and directed by Spielberg and Spielberg alone. And if he'd made it after he was married and had kids, Spielberg says he would never have ended it quite the way he did.

Thank God he wasn't a dad yet. *CET3K* is disturbing, obsessive, mildly bewildering, adult and startlingly spare and abrupt. It's also awe-inspiring and very convincing in delivering the close encounter with aliens the title promises. This movie is far less of a thrill ride than *Raiders* and not remotely the heart-tugger of *E.T.* It's longer than you remember, stranger than you think, more upsetting than you expect and not nearly so joyous as you want. In it, a man goes nearly insane, destroys his home life and then knowingly and intentionally abandons his family, probably forever. Yet in 1977 it saved Columbia Pictures and became that studio's biggest hit of all time.

I have a friend who was traumatized by it when her parents took her to the film at a far-too-young age. In many ways, *Jaws* is a lot less scary. In *Jaws*, the danger is a monster you can understand -- a beast of the deep doing what it was made to do: swim and eat. In *CET3K*, the monster is within: it's the madness in your brain, the once-loving father in your home. It is Spielberg's most personal film.

And in the same year composer John Williams revived the film score with the all-time blockbuster, Wagnerian triumph that was the music of *Star Wars* (an even bigger hit at the box office), he also delivered



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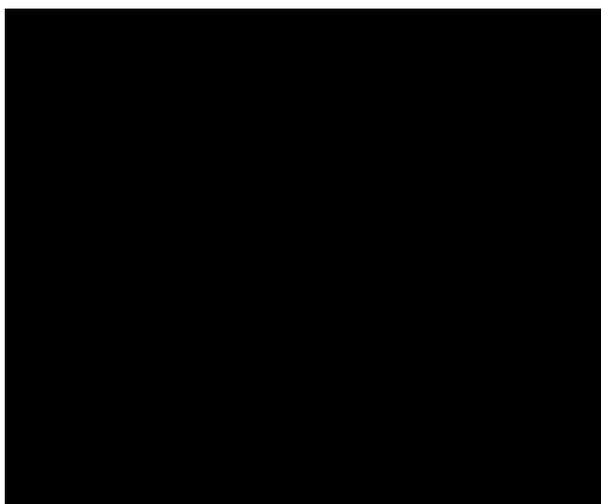
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astriquent eerie work for *CET3K*. It contains one of his most famous, iconic and widely parodied themes (the five note "doorbell" that serves as a hello between humanity and aliens) and yet it's also one of his least appreciated scores.

That ends now thanks to the New York premiere of the full score conducted by Richard Kaufman, performed by the New York Philharmonic and the Musica Sacra chorus, all accompanying a print of Spielberg's preferred cut of the film. If you're lucky enough to be in the city, head to Lincoln Center and [snap up any remaining tickets for Thursday, September 12](#). Even better, grab tickets as well for [The Art Of The Score's performance of Bernard Herrmann's innovative, all-strings work on Alfred Hitchcock's \*Psycho\*](#). Those performances take place September 13th and 14th.

It's great to see the diverse audience attending these performances. Many are clearly fans of the movie while some are regular attendees of the Philharmonic season venturing into less familiar territory. To make a case for the music of John Williams, you might be tempted to just deliver a pops concert with one of his scores arranged anew. And why not? The music can stand on its own. But just as rock lyrics aren't poetry, a film score isn't really a symphony. Yes, you can read Bob Dylan's lyrics on their own, but to fully appreciate them you must listen to the songs. The music of John Williams can be complex and challenging and certainly as satisfying as any symphony unafraid to be tuneful. But a score is best heard and appreciated in context: with a projection of the film. And The Art Of The Score series allows you to do that in an ideal setting, with the film beautifully projected but the score invariably dominating your attention thanks to a live performance.



*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is curiously overlooked in Spielberg's career. *Jaws* looms large as his first breakthrough and of course *E.T.* and *Raiders* are all time entertainments alongside it. His "mature" films, the award bait that allowed Hollywood to take

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Spielberg seriously, began with *The Color Purple*, flourished with *Empire of the Sun* (perhaps his peak as a director) and achieved the desired dream via the Oscar-winning movies *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg was all grown up, unfortunately, and rarely made a great film again (except when he forgot himself and delivered the pure entertainment of *Catch Me If You Can*, the last movie worthy of him). Yet way back towards the start, when *Jaws* was a monster hit that let Spielberg write his own ticket, he wrote and directed *CET3K*, a harrowing look at the disintegration of a family that makes no apologies and doesn't even pretend to comfort at the end.

The film's dramatic weight struck me when seeing the film in theaters during its 30th anniversary release. Now with the essential Art Of The Score series, for the first time I appreciated that John Williams is just as bold as the director. In *Star Wars*, he delivers rousing themes by the yard. In this film, he jolts you at the start and then gets under your skin with skittering cues that don't resolve themselves. They tantalize, they tease, but they never quite say "be scared" or "be excited" or "be worried." They unsettle you. The choral work of Musica Sacra was especially striking since I barely realized there WAS any vocal work in the score the previous five or ten times I've seen the film.

Heck, I barely remembered anything about the score except for the climactic scene where first contact is initiated with a five note "hello" played by humans and repeated by alien craft. That back-and-forth game of Simon Says was captured to perfection by [the electronic toy Simon](#) (introduced in 1978). In my mind, I remembered the entire finale as just a synth-fest of some sort.

Far from it. The philharmonic had long passages throughout the first half of the film where they were at rest. *CET3K* isn't the marathon of a performance that *Star Wars* proved in their triumphant rendition of that score. When intermission ended and they stretched out with some full-bodied themes before the film proper started up again, I thought it a welcome chance to let them strut their stuff since the score was more discreet than usual for Williams. Well, it turns out the beautifully paced climactic scene features the full orchestra. My memory of a synth-fest in fact begins with a woodwind (I think!) duetting with a tuba. The small voice of humanity and the booming sound of aliens are actually playful and warm and soon more and more instruments join in. It's positively delightful and a release to hear the melody hinted at throughout the film receiving its due.

Earlier in the movie, a little boy is abducted by aliens. (It's the scene you see in the trailer where the child is opening a door while a fiery but enticing red light comes bursting in. Spielberg says that may be the defining image of his career and I'd agree.) It's scary but because the little boy isn't really frightened at any point, we instinctively know the aliens won't hurt him. Little children and puppies are invariably good predictors of danger in movies: if they look nervous or growl, you should be nervous too.

In the same way, the score that unnerves us throughout, the five note melody that pops up here and there but never gets resolved in a musical fashion finally bursts out at the finale. The orchestral interplay during that triumphant meeting of humanity and alien life is overwhelming and heart-stopping. But because it's told through the voice of the orchestra rather than synthesizers (as I always imagined) the audience knows this is a conversation, a dialogue. The tuba makes you smile. Yes, the interplay is frantic and a little confusing, but it's messy and human (or should I say humane?), a meeting of minds rather than a clashing of cultures. And Williams told us all that with his score alone.

At the end, conductor Richard Kaufman pointed out individual musicians and sections of the philharmonic one by one, calling on them to take a bow. But of course it was John Williams who stood tallest. He wrote and experimented with hundreds of different five note themes, searching for the perfect combination that would satisfy Spielberg and allow Williams to undergird two hours of film with music that never called undue attention to itself. He succeeded. Again. The result is one of his most innovative and least appreciated scores, just as *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* is one of Spielberg's most mature, least appreciated major films.

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day with top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.*

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 1:25 AM 

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