

AYSO Program Notes
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By Noel Morris ©2025

Williams “Flying Theme” from *E.T.*

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial sold 120 million tickets during its initial 1982 release—one ticket for every two people living in North America. Today, the American Film Institute ranks the Steven Spielberg masterpiece at #25 on the list of greatest American movies.

Composer John Williams told The Film Music Society, “At the time I was working on it, I don't think I really realized how truly great that film is. It sets the most magical story in the most mundane of circumstances: the suburbs, a broken marriage, a couple of interesting kids, this little creature hidden in the bedroom, falling in love with these young Earthlings and vice versa.”

If you doubt Williams’s contribution to *E.T.*, watch the five-minute bicycle chase on mute. There’s no magic without the music—just kids on bikes fake-flying over suburbia.

As a rule, a film composer writes music to fit the director’s cut. When the production crew lays down the soundtrack, they use several methods to get live musicians to sync up with what’s on screen. One involves marking the film with a hole punch at regular intervals to indicate tempo visually (this is now done digitally). Another involves putting headphones on the musicians and playing a click track. For the conductor’s benefit, markings on the film, called streamers, provide specific cues.

When John Williams recorded the bicycle chase or “Flying Theme” for *E.T.*, he recalled missing his cues. Take after take, he couldn’t get the music to line up with the film. Finally, he explained that he was trying to get the best performance out of the musicians. At that point, Spielberg let go of control and told the composer to conduct the orchestra as if playing a concert.

Williams conducted the sequence, and Spielberg re-cut the film to fit the music. He later said, “Without question, John Williams has been the single most significant contributor to my success as a filmmaker.”

Tchaikovsky *Capriccio Italien*

The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova wrote, “Italy is a dream that keeps returning for the rest of your life.” Just ask Liszt, Stravinsky, Wagner, Richard Strauss, Britten, Mendelssohn, and Tchaikovsky. They all traveled to Italy from some Northern clime and wrote music about it. Elton John said, “I love the Italian way of life. I love the food. I love the people. I love the attitudes.”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky came into money in 1877. The wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck offered her friendship (as a pen pal) and an annual allowance. Her money freed him to quit his day job and compose.

“I am senselessly bored,” he wrote. “Moscow is absolutely disgusting to me . . . I leave right out of the classroom and try not to talk to anyone or meet anyone.” Weeks later, he stopped teaching at the Moscow Conservatory, gave up his apartment, and hit the road.

In January 1880, he and his brother Modeste settled into a hotel room in Rome. Every morning, they woke to a bugle call blaring from the nearby cavalry barracks. When February rolled around, they experienced Carnival season with thousands of masked revelers (like Mardi Gras in New Orleans).

Tchaikovsky wrote to von Meck, “I have been working successfully over the recent days, and I have already prepared in rough an *Italian Fantasia on folk themes* . . . It will be effective, thanks to its delightful tunes, some of which I chose from collections and some of which I heard myself on the streets.”

The piece that became *Capriccio Italien* opens with the bugle call that the composer heard from his hotel room. The music builds to a rousing rendition of the tune “Bella ragazza dalle trecce bionde” and, finally, a tarantella, a dizzying dance originating from the heel of Italy’s boot. According to pagan tradition, the dance expels the poison from a tarantula bite.

Respighi *Fountains of Rome*

“I wonder why no one has ever thought of making the fountains of Rome sing,” Respighi wrote, “for they are, after all, the very voice of the city.”

Nicknamed the Eternal City, Rome boasts two hundred eighty public fountains. The focal point of piazzas, gardens, and the occasional movie scene, these watery wonders mingle the stories of legendary sculptors, powerful Baroque popes, and mind-boggling feats of ancient engineering. Today, frolicking in the fountains, à la Fellini’s *La dolce vita*, is strictly prohibited. But coins are welcome—each year, custodians pull roughly one point five million euros from the Trevi Fountain. The money goes to charity.

Ottorino Respighi moved to Rome in 1913 and fell under the city’s spell. As World War I raged, he wrote *Fountains of Rome*. When conductor Arturo Toscanini included the piece on a 1918 veterans benefit, fame and fortune followed.

Fountains of Rome depicts four different fountains, each viewed at a different time of day. Starting with Valle Giulia at dawn (near the grounds of Villa Borghese), Respighi described the piece’s opening as a “pastoral landscape: droves of cattle pass and disappear in the fresh, damp mists of the Roman dawn.”

In the early morning light, the piece takes us to the Piazza Barberini to view Bernini’s 17th-century masterpiece: the Triton Fountain. “It is like a joyous call,” Respighi wrote, “summoning troops of naiads and tritons, who come running up, pursuing each other and mingling in a frenzied dance between the jets of water.”

A midday visit to the Trevi Fountain follows. Located at the terminus of a Roman aqueduct from 19 BC, the Trevi displays “Neptune’s chariot drawn by seahorses and followed by a train of sirens and tritons.”

The Fountain at the Villa Medici closes the piece. Respighi captures it in the “nostalgic hour of sunset. The air is full of the sound of tolling bells, the twittering of birds, the rustling of leaves. Then all dies peacefully into the silence of the night.”

Williams “The Flight to Neverland”

To date, Steven Spielberg and John Williams have made 26 films together, including the Indiana Jones movies, *Jaws*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Schindler’s List*. Williams has won five Oscars.

The two of them did *Hook* in 1991 with a treasure chest of Tinseltown A-listers, including Robin Williams as Peter Pan, Dustin Hoffman as Captain Hook, Julia Roberts as Tinkerbell, and Gwyneth Paltrow as Wendy. Other cast members included Phil Collins, Glenn Close, David Crosby, and Maggie Smith. Unfortunately, these Hollywood heavies couldn’t keep from sinking the ship. *Hook* scored an abysmal 29 on *Rotten Tomatoes*.

Originally, Spielberg conceived the movie as a musical and went so far as to hire lyricist Leslie Bricusse (*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*). John Williams, wrote a terrific collection of songs for the project before Spielberg scrapped the idea. The unused songs went into a vault until 2023 (fans resurrected them for a commercial recording).

Despite *Hook’s* poor box-office showing, the film score is a keeper. Orchestras as far away as the Vienna Philharmonic and London Symphony Orchestra continue to perform Williams’s soundtrack. In “The Flight to Neverland,” Tinkerbell whisks Peter away from his London home and off into the night. Cue the glitter.