

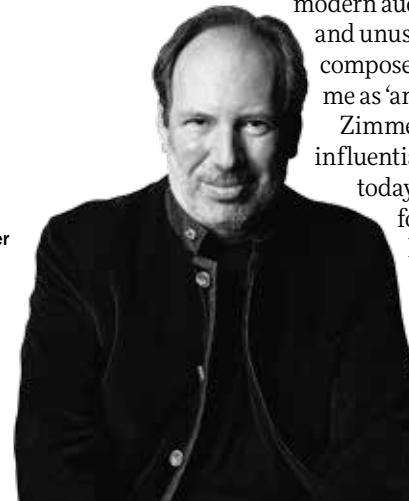


Lights, conductor, action!

A trip to the concert hall to watch a classic film accompanied by a live symphony orchestra is becoming increasingly popular, says Michael Beek, who explores the magic behind the experience

The lights go down in the concert hall, where a sea of expectant faces is lit by a vast flickering cinema screen. It hangs in the air, seemingly floating above the orchestra, whose own faces are lit by the lights on their music stands. The familiar sight of the 20th Century Fox logo fills the screen, its searchlights waving as the down beat of Alfred Newman's equally familiar musical fanfare is struck from the orchestra by

Screen time:
(above) *Psycho*
at London's
Roundhouse;
(right) composer
Hans Zimmer;
(opposite)
conductor
Ben Palmer



the conductor. The audience cheers and claps; the atmosphere is electric, and then a hush descends. This is film with live music.

The last few years have seen a growing trend, as halls and arenas around the world have begun to present blockbuster films with the added dimension of a live orchestra. Though it's not a new concept – in fact, it's one of the oldest if you glance back to the silent era – the experience for

modern audiences is both immersive and unusual. It's what Oscar-winning composer Hans Zimmer describes to me as 'an extraordinary treat'.

Zimmer is perhaps the most influential composer working in film today, having written the music for some of cinema's biggest hits, including *Gladiator*, *The Lion King*, *Interstellar* and most recently Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*. Last year

he took a break from the 'day job', hitting the road on his own blockbusting concert tour; and while this wasn't about live scores exactly, it offered the composer (and musician) the opportunity to see for himself the appetite there is right now for live film music. Was he surprised at its success? 'A little,' he admits. 'The first thing I said to (concert promoter) Harvey Goldsmith was "do you think anyone will come?" Come they did, and in their thousands, as Zimmer and his hand-picked ensemble played to packed arenas across the globe. But playing a Zimmer score live in concert is no easy feat.

'I've written so many things that are not easy to pull off in front of a live audience,' he explains, 'because I use odd line-ups. I love the line-up of 28 cellos and eight basses only. It's hard to get that in your normal symphony orchestra, plus the brass section is going to be really cross with you because there's nothing for them to play. I remember an orchestra taking *Pirates of the Caribbean* out to do live and I said "you'd better book two complete French horn sections, because they need to take a break – their lips will literally start bleeding!" When we originally recorded the movie, we did it over a six-day period.'

Playing film scores live is not just a feat of endurance for the musicians – the conductor also has a huge job to take on. Ben Palmer has presided over a number of live film score presentations in recent years, from the silents and *The Snowman* to golden-age classics such as *Casablanca* and *Psycho*. In January, he conducted a screening of Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* at the Royal Festival Hall, and later this year he embarks on a European tour of Spielberg's *Jaws* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with the Czech National Symphony. Each features original scores by composer John Williams, every note of which Palmer will pore over in preparation for the performances; and it's not just the music he learns, it's the intricate relationship it has to the film.

'Essentially the most important thing from my point of view about the mechanics of it, if you like, is how I stay in touch with the film,' Palmer says. 'Doing a silent film requires a pretty astonishing amount of preparation – Chaplin's *Gold Rush* is 88 minutes and it probably took me three and a half months to learn. Those things can be really hard, and it's precarious, but if you're well prepared it's really fun.'

For films like *Psycho* or *Jaws*, Palmer's task isn't much different, though unlike a silent film they come with dialogue and sound effects

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Symphonic Brando:
David Newman conducts
the score to *On the
Waterfront* in New York



" To fit with the film you have to do some amazing things so that it feels completely natural for the audience "

tracks that are played simultaneously with the music. Synchronicity, speed and rhythm are still key, however, and remain a specific challenge, as he explains. 'To fit with the film, you have to do some quite amazing things, and you have to be in the right place, so that it just feels completely natural for the audience. The closest thing you can get to directing film scores in the classical world is conducting ballet. There's no point having a beautifully played Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker* if it's too slow or too fast, or doesn't give enough space for the dancers; and it's exactly the same with a live film adaptation.'

Studying and conducting scores by the likes of Bernard Herrmann and John Williams has only cemented Palmer's respect and admiration for them and their art. 'It is often there where the real craft of the composer shows through,' he explains, 'because writing a memorable melody is fine, but underscoring physical movement in a way that still has an emotional thought behind it – that is the literal genius of the music.'

For Hans Zimmer it's all about the shared experience. He recalls a one-off screening and performance of *Interstellar* at the Royal Albert Hall in 2015: 'I was very aware, really concerned, that it would be enhancing the experience people already had. I mean there is something great about a communal experience – as opposed to a family sitting on the couch – and there's something great about having people who really play for you. Looking the audience in the eye is very different, and somehow the music becomes something different as well. It's as if the audience completes it. You're sort of in it together.'

Big screen sounds

Live film events in 2018

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Czech National Symphony Orchestra/Ben Palmer

5 April Colston Hall, Bristol

21 September Symphony Hall, Birmingham

Jaws

Czech NSO/Ben Palmer

6 April Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

7 April Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool

8 April York Barbican

10 April Cliffs Pavilion, Southend

11 April Symphony Hall, B'ham

12 April Brighton Dome

13 April The Anvil, Basingstoke

14 April Colston Hall, Bristol

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

BBC Concert Orchestra/Justin Freer

27-29 April Royal Albert Hall, London

2001: A Space Odyssey

Philharmonia/André de Ridder

28 April Royal Festival Hall, London

Planet Earth II

BBC Concert Orchestra/Jessica Cottis

13 May Royal Albert Hall

Vertigo

RLPO/Anthony Gabriele

24 May Philharmonic Hall, L'pool

Star Trek/Star Trek Beyond

Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra/Ernst Van Tiel

2 & 3 June Royal Albert Hall

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

RPCO/Ernst Van Tiel

14 June Royal Albert Hall

The English Patient

21st Century Symphony Orch/Ludwig Wicki

18 October

Royal Albert Hall

Home Alone

Cinematic Sinfonia/Palmer

22 December

Royal Albert Hall



Taking the stage:
Hans Zimmer (right) performs with
singer Pharrell Williams in 2017

The composer will attempt to do the same again in May as *Planet Earth II* takes to the stage at the Royal Albert Hall, a concert that sees highlights from the BBC nature series projected on the big screen with live music by Zimmer and co-composers Jacob Shea and David Fleming. He is quick to heap praise on the pair, telling me ‘they write with such grace and beauty’; and he’s excited at the prospect of presenting their music live with the big screen. ‘That subject matter lends itself tremendously to music, and so for it to go to the Albert Hall is a great honour for us. Imagine having those images so vast and huge, and that clear and beautiful. So get away from your TV for a moment and experience it!’

Zimmer’s sentiment is echoed by Jamie Richardson and Steven Linder, founders of Film Concerts Live!, which presents live cinema events around the world. They also see such events as an opportunity for rediscovery. ‘In an age when many of us watch films alone on smart phones, tablets or laptop computers, being able to share the movie-going experience with 2,000 or more fellow fans enhances the enjoyment exponentially,’ says Richardson. ‘The energy

in a concert hall is palpable, and for many people, it’s like watching a favourite film for the first time.’

So for the paying crowd it seems there’s a mixture of curiosity and a desire to watch a film they love in a whole new way. Indeed, the concert

hall setting even permits audience behaviour not usually seen or heard in the cinema, as Ben Palmer never fails to notice from the conductor’s podium: ‘It can be really hard to concentrate actually, while behind you the audience is crying with laughter. Last night I was doing *The Snowman* and after “Walking in the Air”, with a lovely treble singing, the audience just burst into applause. It’s amazing, and I imagine it’ll be the same in *E.T.* when the bike takes off.’

The audience for a live film score is perhaps, then, witness to a great spectacle, a feat of endurance and synchronicity. Tradition and technology converge as the orchestra recreates, in real time, music that was originally recorded over a number of days, maybe even weeks, and with the luxury of multiple takes. Here they perform it straight through, hitting integral beats of physical action, submitting to sudden and necessary changes in tempo, while always providing a key emotional subtext. This happens almost entirely unnoticed as the audience quickly gets swept up in the story unfolding on screen. But that’s the ultimate role of the film score, isn’t it – to be subservient to the film and subconsciously to feed, move and thrill the viewer.

For Hans Zimmer, the concerts play an even more important role in the long term: ‘I’m just grateful and happy that audiences are coming to see orchestras. I think it’s important that we carry on figuring out how to keep orchestral music relevant, and if it’s *Planet Earth* or *Blue Planet* that can not only do something about making us ecologically more conscious, but delight us enough that it provides a foundation for musicians to really shine, then that’s great.’



Suspenseful: James Stewart and Kim Novak star in *Vertigo*, to be shown with a live orchestra in Liverpool on 24 May