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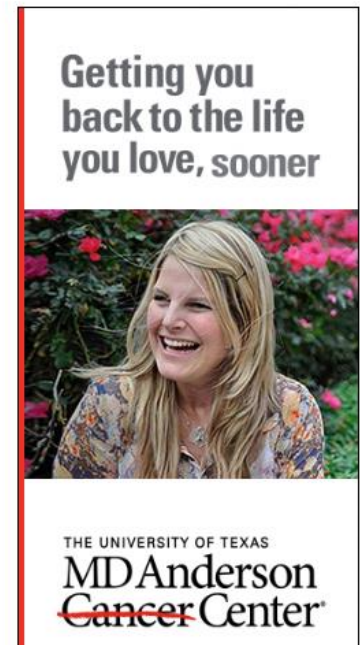
How 'Harry Potter,' 'Star Wars' help Houston Symphony find new audiences

Turning performing arts centers such as the Hobby Center and Jones Hall into large movie theaters showing classic family films broadens the orchestra's reach



Cary Darling, Staff Writer

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A still from the Harry Potter film series.

Screencap/Warner Bros.

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Nicole Talbot loves the "Harry Potter" movies.

"I'll be honest, I'm a geek," says the Houston resident. "I have robes that I bought at Universal Studios, so I love the opportunity to wear my robe."

But it's where she gets the chance to wear that robe that might strike some as incongruous: a performance by [the Houston Symphony](#). But not just *any* performance. She hauls out her Potter wear when the orchestra performs a live musical soundtrack to a screening of one of the films in the "Harry Potter" franchise.

Similarly, another area movie fan, Ivy Gonzalez, likes to go the symphony to let her geek flag fly high. She has seen all the "Harry Potter" films with the symphony as well as "Star Trek: Into Darkness," "Jurassic Park," "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and the first "Black Panther."

"People dress up," she says. "It's kind of a community event where you get to interact in a way you normally couldn't (during a symphony). ... You can scream at your favorite scenes."

'Harry Potter & the Sorcerer's Stone' In Concert

When: 7:30 p.m. July 14-15, 2:30 p.m. July 15; 7:30 p.m. July 22

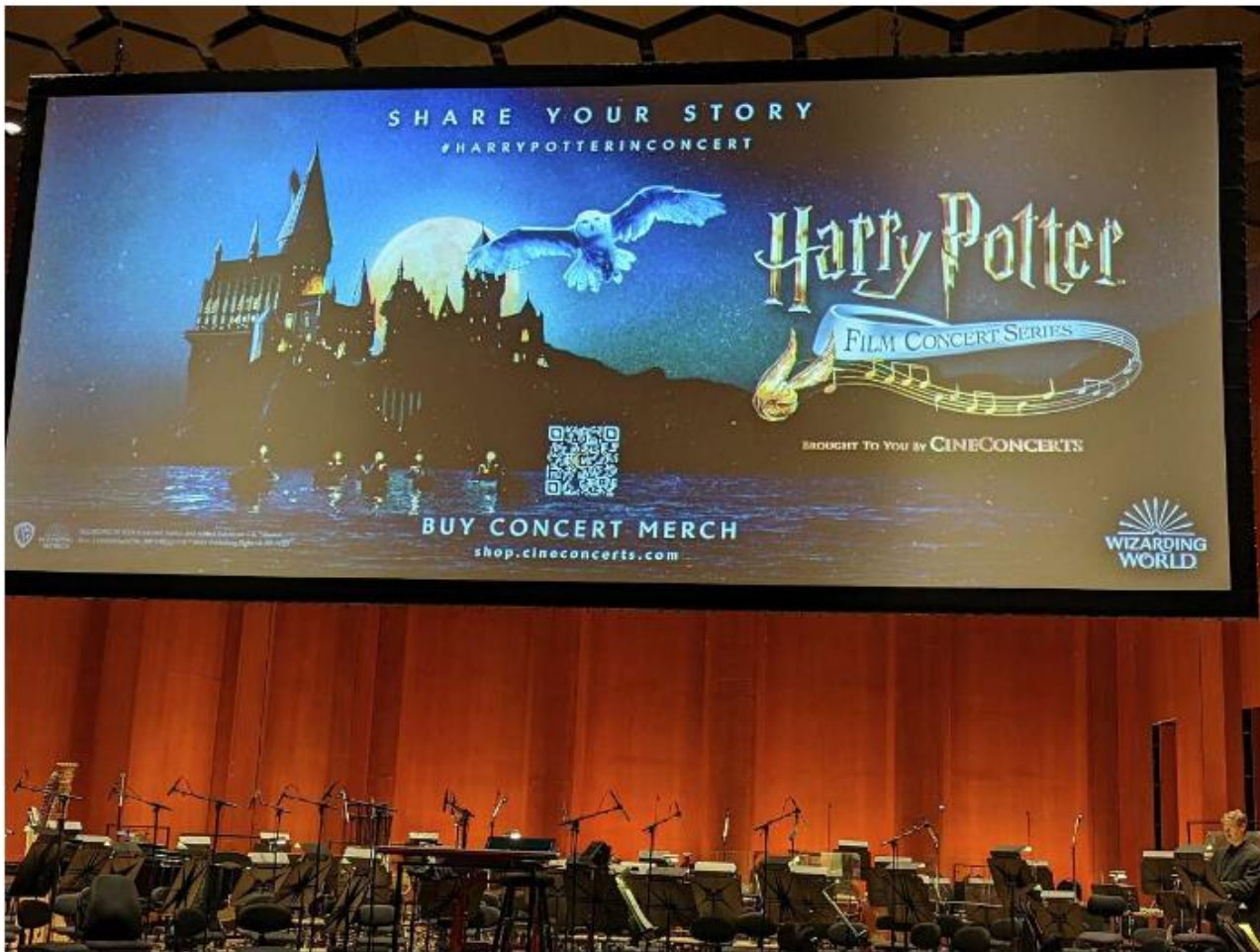
Where: Hobby Center, 800 Bagby (July 14-15); Smart Financial Centre, 18111 Lexington, Sugar Land (July 22)

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Talbot and Gonzalez are far from alone.

The Houston Symphony's movie concerts – which continue with "Harry Potter & the Sorcerer's Stone" July 14-15 at the Hobby Center in Houston and July 22 at the Smart Financial Centre in Sugar Land and "Star Wars: A New Hope" at the Hobby Center July 28-29 – has proved popular, luring concert-goers who otherwise might not be interested in a symphonic performance. They continue into the fall with "Raiders of the Lost Ark" on Nov. 4-5 and "Tim Burton's A Nightmare Before Christmas" Dec. 9-10, both at Jones Hall.

"There's usually not an empty seat in the house," Talbot continues, "because there are so many people who really enjoy that experience."



— The moments before the beginning of a Houston Symphony concert featuring the orchestra providing the score for "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2" in April 2023.

Cary Darling

That was certainly true in April at a showing of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2" in which the audience, some in attire, whooped and cheered at all the appropriate moments while the orchestra thundered below the giant, 40-by-17-foot screen. It offers a more immediate and involving (and, yes, expensive) experience than watching it in a multiplex or, especially, at home.

All of that is music to the ears of John Mangum, the Houston Symphony's executive director and CEO. After all, when the symphony previously showed the first four Harry Potter films, they attracted more than 7,000 patrons for each title's three-performance engagement, according to figures provided by the symphony. That compares to the 3,931 who showed up to hear a popular orchestral work, Holst's "The Planets," for its three-performance run last season.

"From a marketing standpoint, it's about developing that segment of the audience that really enjoys this particular experience and then making sure that we're programming enough to keep them happy and engaged," he says.

From Hollywood to Houston

Mangum notes that films have been part of the symphony's programming for several years, predating his arrival five-and-a-half years ago. But the idea of merging a symphony with a popular movie began, of course, in Hollywood.

"There was really one orchestra that was doing it for longer, and that was the Los Angeles Philharmonic, because of where they are," he explains. "They do film projects every summer at the Hollywood Bowl. But it really became viable for (other) orchestras when the film studios and producers started making movies available as concert projects. That really started happening, really, about 10 years ago."

Mangum says he has received little pushback from more traditional classical-music supporters, though there are always a few season subscribers who want to trade in their movie concert tickets for something else. "But that's far outweighed by the interest that it piques in new audiences," says Mangum, noting the Houston Symphony performs roughly a half-dozen movie concerts a year.

"The thing that we really try to focus on is the musical value of the movie," he continues. "For example, both of the films we're doing this summer, 'Star Wars: Episode Four' and the first Harry Potter, have scores by John Williams. ... He's a lauded, recognized, incredible composer, and just happens to work in the genre of film for a lot of his music. We approach it from a musical angle, and that helps overcome whatever resistance there might be."



Houston Symphony's John Mangum says such films as "Star Wars" and "Harry Potter" draw in audiences who don't usually attend the symphony.

Gary Fountain/Contributor

The musicians, too, occasionally enjoy exchanging Vivaldi for Voldemort.

"Even to this day, I remember going and seeing 'Catch Me If You Can' many, many years ago, and it was John Williams who had done that score, but I didn't know it. I was sitting there all during the movie watching the plot unfold but I'm thinking, 'Who wrote this score?'" says trumpeter Mark Hughes. "When 'Star Wars' came out, I was in high school, and I remember thinking while hearing the London Symphony on the recording, 'Wow, that's cool. I wonder if I could ever do that one day.'"

'It is intense'

Well, that day has arrived. But beyond the kick of playing along to the images of a childhood favorite, the movie concerts also present unique challenges, such as choosing the appropriate film.

"Like the Spider-Man that's out in theaters now, it's a great movie, but I'm not sure that it would be a great fit for a performance with orchestra," says Mangum. "The sweet spot is that movie that has really great recognition in terms of the title, a good following, but also has a really strong score. So that's looking at movies that have Oscar-winning scores; it's classic movies with great scores ... 'Harry Potter' and 'Star Wars' also hit that sweet spot of being something that parents and grandparents can bring their kids or grandkids to."

Then there is the painstaking process of having the orchestra replace the original score. After all, the conductor and the players have to be in lockstep with the film. There is absolutely no room for spontaneity or improvisation. Many in the audience know the musical cues by heart, having watched the movies many times.

"We have two 2½-hour rehearsals to get it down and then perform it live, hopefully, with minimal errors so that no one in the audience hears a difference," says Hughes. "It is intense."



— Houston Symphony trumpeter Mark Hughes
Courtesy Houston Symphony

Flutist Judy Dines concurs. "There's lots of interpretations for Beethoven. You might play a movement faster or slower than what is written. ... But with the movies, you have to follow along with the action. So, sometimes you're getting these spots where they're kind of very fast and technically challenging. But (the musicians) have to be up to speed because the movie's going to go on without you."

Keeping it all from devolving into musical anarchy is the conductor.

"The conductor actually has a kind of mini-NORAD setup, with several screens," explains Mangum. "He or she has a screen that shows exactly what's on the screen above them being shown to the audience. But then they also have a screen with a clock on it. ... There are visual cues, either flashes of light, or bright-colored bars that stream across the screen from right to left that give them a sense of where to bring the orchestra in for particular cues and how to time the music so that it lines up directly with the screen. And, of course, they have the printed musical score in front of them with lots of time information written into it. ... It just requires a high level of focus, concentration and coordination."

Mangum says not all conductors are up to the task. "It is really a special skill. There are particular conductors that do these kinds of projects, and know from feedback from the orchestra there are particular conductors they really enjoy working with, so that's who we try to bring in when we do these film projects."

Back to the classics?

But there doesn't appear to be much of a spillover effect from the movie concerts to more traditional symphonic performances. In other words, will "Harry Potter" fans show up for Haydn, too?


"To some extent, but really, what happens is they become devoted followers of this particular aspect of what the symphony does," says Mangum. "So they come back to every 'Harry Potter'; they come back to every 'Star Wars.'"

Gonzalez is a case in point. While she says she has also attended other Pops events, such as a celebration of video game music, she doesn't have a lot of interest in the standard classical works.

"I respect what the traditional symphonies offer," she says. "But my heart tends to lean more towards the pop cultural stuff."



Written By
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Reach Cary on 

Cary Darling joined the Houston Chronicle in 2017 where he writes about arts, entertainment and pop culture, with an emphasis on film and media. Originally from Los Angeles and a graduate of Loyola Marymount University, he has been a features reporter or editor at the Orange County Register, Miami Herald, and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. In addition, he has freelanced for a number of publications including the Los Angeles Times and Dallas Morning News.
