

[Click here](#) to see online program notes on madisonsymphony.org.

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Cirque de la Symphonie: Cirque Goes to the Cinema
September 19, 2025

Our gala weekend closes with a wonderful feast for the eyes and the ears, featuring the **Cirque de la Symphonie** troupe, performing aerial acts, juggling, contortion, dance, hula hoops, magic and much more, all of it performed to a program of works primarily drawn from the movies. And speaking of magic, we don't want to give anything away but keep a close eye on Maestro DeMain at the beginning of the second half!

The program opens with a pair of works featuring the MSO. **Richard Rodgers** and **Oscar Hammerstein II** were responsible of many of the greatest Broadway musicals of the 20th century, but they often referred to their 1945 *Carousel* as their personal favorite. This tale of redemption and lost love regained contains some of their finest songs. One of the most remarkable episodes in *Carousel* is the ballet fantasy sequence choreographed by Agnes de Mille for the original production and accompanied by the swirling and brilliantly orchestrated *Carousel Waltz* by Rodgers. The team of **John Kander** and **Fred Ebb** had a huge Broadway hit with their *Chicago* in 1975, a seamy story of crime and corruption set in the Roaring 20s. In 2002, in the wake of a phenomenally successful 1996 revival on Broadway (which is still open, by the way!) *Chicago* became an equally successful, Oscar-winning Hollywood movie. Here we play selections from Kander's Jazz Age-inspired score.

In November 2001, Warner Brothers issued the first of a successful series of movie adaptations of the wildly popular *Harry Potter* books, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The producers selected none other than the dean of American film music, **John Williams**, to write the score. Williams created a score that is the perfect complement to the movie's magical setting, with musical themes for each character. Here, accompanying the "Ariel Silks" is *Harry's Wondrous World*. This is music that represents Harry himself, a long, questing and adventurous theme with hints of



playfulness—and a mysterious ending. The “Spinning Shapes” are accompanied by the **Theme from *Mission Impossible***. Argentinian composer **Lalo Schifrin** wrote this as the title music for the classic spy series. It is set in 5/4, with an insistent ostinato bass line creating a sense of uneasiness and mystery.

Bernard Herrmann was a leading Hollywood composer from the 1940s through the 1960s, though he is perhaps most famous for a series of collaborations with director Alfred Hitchcock in the late 1950s and 1960s. Herrmann’s innovative scores were the perfect counterpoint to Hitchcock’s tense thrillers. In Hitchcock’s masterpiece *Vertigo* (1958), the director trusted Herrmann’s music to carry nearly all of the climactic 5-minute love scene between detective “Scottie” Ferguson (James Stewart), and Judy Barton (Kim Novak). [Spoiler alert: Judy bears an uncanny resemblance to Madeleine Elster (also Kim Novak), whom Scottie had fallen in love with and whom he thought he had watched die. Judy in fact had imitated Madeleine as part of an elaborate murder scheme by Madeleine’s husband.] Herrmann’s quiet, romantic score, replete with references to Wagner’s *Tristan* “love-death” music, accompanies this scene (which features very little on-screen dialogue), moving towards a grand climactic passage at the end.

Accompanying “Ring Juggling” is more film music by **John Williams**, from *The Witches of Eastwick*. This darkly funny 1987 film centers on three women who live in a picturesque Rhode Island town. The three are unaware that they are witches, until they are each seduced in turn by a mysterious newcomer, Daryl Van Horne (the Devil, played with gusto by Jack Nicholson). The *Devil’s Dance*, which Williams wrote as the closing title music is a *danse macabre*-style showcase for solo violin. For “Contortion & Dance” we have familiar music by **James Horner** for *Titanic* (1997). This film was—well—*titanic* in every way: a record-topping production budget, record box office receipts, and it was the first film to garner 11 Academy Awards, including Best Original Score and Best Original Song awards for Horner. The song, of course, was *My Heart Will Go On*, which became a megahit for singer Céline Dion, Horner wrote this grand, gradually developing power ballad for the closing credits, though Dion issued it as a single in November 1997, a couple of weeks before the film itself opened.

To close our first half, we have music from the film *Hook*, accompanying “Aerial Straps.” One of the most enduring partnerships in the history of Hollywood is between director Steven Spielberg and **John Williams**. Williams has scored all but three of Spielberg’s films: to date, they have worked together on a total of 29 movies spanning more than 50 years. Their *Hook* (1991) was an imaginative sequel to the *Peter Pan* story, starring Robin Williams as a “grown up” Peter who has

forgotten all about Neverland, and Dustin Hoffman as his nemesis, Captain Hook. Though it was not one of their more successful collaborations, *Hook* included some wonderful musical moments by Williams. (It was initially conceived as a movie musical, and three songs Williams wrote with lyricist Leslie Bricusse survived in the final version.) The *Flight to Neverland* is bold “travelling music,” with the perfect blend of wonder and swashbuckling.

To open the second half, the troupe’s Magician will perform a bit of magical business with Maestro DeMain. This happens to music by **Scott Joplin**.

Joplin was one of the most famous of the itinerant black pianists who created a popular style known as ragtime at the beginning of the 20th century. (The name came from “ragged time”—a reference to the highly syncopated nature of this music.) *The Entertainer* (1902) was one of several successful piano rags Joplin published, though typically for the time, the composer earned only a one-time fee for publication, with nearly all of the profits going to the publisher. It became popular again when it was adapted for the 1973 movie *The Sting*. It is in a typical form for piano rags: a series of repeated sections, each of which becomes gradually more intensely syncopated than the last.



A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away... No one who lived through the 1970s and early 1980s is likely to forget the initial impact of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* movies. At the urging of Steven Spielberg, Lucas hired **John Williams** to provide a full symphonic score for the first *Star Wars* movie in 1977. He would eventually create scores for all nine of the main *Star Wars* films, sometimes dubbed the “Skywalker Saga.” In creating these enormous scores, Williams depended on a technique heard in operas by Richard Wagner and in film scores by classic Hollywood composers of the 1930s and 1940s like Max Steiner and Erich Korngold: *Leitmotifs*—musical phrases representing characters, objects, or ideas from the drama. In *Star Wars*, these motives link the drama together, across the film and across the whole series. They often provide a subtext for what is going on up on the screen, complementing the action or revealing additional meaning. Here the MSO plays excerpts from the first film (Episode IV). *The Throne Room* comes from the final scene, as Luke Skywalker and Han Solo are honored by Princess Leia. It begins with a processional march that is a determined counterweight to Darth Vader’s darker music. This gives way to a more stately march that is a cousin to Elgar’s great *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. The *End Title* brings

together major motives—especially those of Luke and Leia—and the rousing opening music before a great brass chorale at the conclusion.

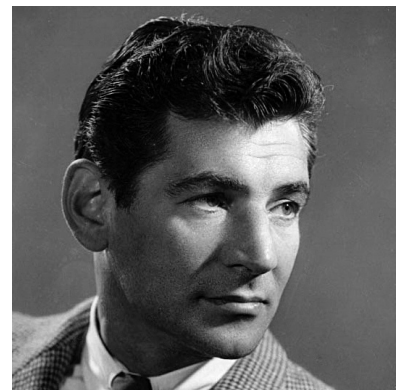
To accompany a performance on the “Cyr Wheel,” we have music by **Leonard Bernstein**. In late 1943, Bernstein was approached by an up-and-coming dancer, Jerome Robbins, who wanted Bernstein to write a score for his *Fancy Free*—a new ballet about three sailors on a shore leave in New York. The ballet was an immediate success when it opened in April 1944. Bernstein and Robbins were encouraged to expand their work into a full-fledged Broadway musical, and by June, they were at work on the new show, *On the Town*, Bernstein brought in his friends Betty Comden and Adolphe Green to write a book and lyrics. When it opened on Broadway a couple of weeks later it was a hit, running for a respectable 463 performances. The 1949 movie version, starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra, won an Oscar for best picture that year. None of *Fancy Free*’s music was replicated in *On the Town*, which expands on the story of sailors on a 24-hour pass. Bernstein brought together much of the music he wrote for Robbins’s innovative dance sequence in a 1945 orchestral suite, *Three Dance Episodes from “On the Town”*. Bernstein describes the third movement, *Times Square: 1944*, as a “panoramic sequence in which all the sailors in New York congregate in Times Square for their night of fun. There is communal dancing, a scene in a souvenir arcade, and a scene in the Roseland Dance Palace.” The music that dominates this episode is the show’s irrepressible opening song *New York, New York*, whether in a big show dance or a sexy saxophone solo.

Next is an orchestral feature, *Hooray for Hollywood*, a brief and brilliant concert overture by **John Williams**. The title song was written in 1937 by Johnny Mercer, with music by Richard Whiting, for the movie *Hollywood Hotel*. You will also hear quotations of Irving Berlin’s *There’s no Business Like Show Business*, and *That’s Entertainment* by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz. Williams wrote this piece in 1988 for the Boston Pops Orchestra and later remembered that “Doing this orchestration was purely a lark for me and allowed me to salute some early orchestrator-heroes of mine such as Adolph Deutsch, Nathan Van Cleave and Conrad Salinger, all of whom were masters of the early Hollywood style. The lyrics for this song are by the immortal Johnny Mercer, with whom I had the great privilege of collaborating on several songs over the years. What a delightful legacy these great men have given us...and what a joy to remember and salute them!”

To back up the “Electric Juggler,” we have frenetic music by **Dmitry Kabalevsky**. In 1939, he wrote a set of incidental pieces for a children’s play titled *The Inventor and the Comedian*, whose main characters are Johannes Gutenberg, the 15th-

century inventor of the printing press, at his best friend Siegfried, the leader of a troupe of performers. (As ludicrous as it might seem, the play had a solidly Soviet message.) Kabalevsky later extracted a ten-movement orchestral suite titled *The Comedians*, which includes the *Galop*. This uproarious piece—probably Kabalevsky’s best-known work—is led throughout by a wild xylophone part. The “Ribbon Dance” is accompanied by another wild dance piece the *Can-Can* by **Jacques Offenbach**. Offenbach owned a rather seedy theater in Paris, that limped along with a small group of singers and a tiny orchestra for a few years...but that all changed in 1858, when Offenbach produced a more ambitious work, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Offenbach used one of the most venerable stories in all of opera for a scandalous parody of both operatic conventions and Parisian society. *Orpheus* was a minor success until a newspaper critic published a huffy review. Parisians then flocked to the theater to see what all the fuss was about, and the opera closed only after 226 consecutive performances. The most famous excerpt from the opera was the outrageous *Can-Can*. This dance, popular in some of the seamier Parisian dance halls of the 1850s, had begun as a lively couple’s dance but had evolved into a high-kicking—and revealing—stage dance by showgirls in short skirts. *Très scandaleux!*

Leonard Bernstein, like many of his predecessors, was attracted to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as subject-matter for a stage work—the tragic story of lovers from two warring clans has universal appeal and relevance. Bernstein was particularly intrigued when playwright Arthur Laurents suggested that he write the music for an “updated” version of the tragedy, set not in 16th-century Verona, but in modern New York City. *West Side Story*, completed in 1957, was an amazingly successful synthesis of classical and Broadway



elements. It ran for 973 performances. The doomed lovers in *West Side Story* are a Puerto Rican girl, Maria, and a Polish-American boy, Tony. In place of feuding Montagues and Capulets, there two rival gangs fighting for territory. The Sharks are Puerto Ricans, and the Jets are Tony’s Polish-American buddies. A good Broadway overture typically lays out several of the show’s main songs. Bernstein does this in a limited way in the *West Side Story Overture*, which here accompanies “Hula Hoops.” But the main point of this overture is to set up the tragedy and violence that is to follow. The opening music is that of the Jets: a self-consciously cool and jazzy texture. The music increasingly becomes a battle between this cool music and Puerto Rican rhythms played by the timbales in a wild

version of *Mambo*. It reaches a violent climax and is brought to sudden halt by Officer Krupke's police whistle.

In 1977, **John Kander** and **Fred Ebb** wrote several songs for Robert De Niro's film *New York, New York*. The story centers on a saxophonist (Robert De Niro) and a singer (Liza Minnelli), and their turbulent relationship. The eponymous theme song is sung near the end by Minelli, a stirring tribute to New York City. Minelli's recording of *New York, New York* was a hit, but it became an even bigger hit when it was covered by Frank Sinatra, who made it one of his signature songs.

Critical and fan reactions to Lucas's second *Star Wars* trilogy—designed as “prequels” to the original trilogy—were decidedly mixed, but there were no doubts about **John Williams**'s music for these films. One of the themes that Williams wrote for *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) is *Across the Stars*, representing the doomed love affair of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé. This is music that grows gradually from a plaintive oboe solo to a powerful, sweeping climax. Here it provides the perfect romantic background to the “Aerial Duo.” Accompanying the final Cirque act, “Strength & Balance,” is music from Ridley Scott's 2000 movie *Gladiator*. It starred Russell Crowe as a betrayed Roman general, Maximus Decimus Meridius, who is sold into slavery, and who rises through the ranks of Roman gladiators in search of revenge. **Hans Zimmer**'s score captures both the savagery of battle and the Colosseum and Maximus's more gentle memories. In John Wasson's medley, heard here, there is a quiet opening that is put aside by percussion-driven music from Maximus's battle with a barbarian horde. A long quiet interlude representing his memories of his family, is followed by strident combat music from the Colosseum, which clearly channels the savage *Mars* movement of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*.