Story Variations: Fairytales, Folk tales, Myths and Legends in Music

Learning Lab Exploration 2: *Star Wars, myths, and the use of Leitmotifs*

From the ASO's Young Peoples Concerts Series

THE AUSTIN SYMPHONY

MYTHS

Myth is derived from the Greek word for story, mythos, and refers to a tale or narrative that recounts foundational, legendary, or sacred aspects of a culture or society: how life was created, how things came into being, or what beliefs people hold.

Myths involve tales of gods, goddesses and heroes.

They are metaphorical.

Myths are created to explain why and how things are the way they are.

They reflect awe towards whatever it is that motivates and generates life.

Some of the most famous myths come from Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, but there are other well-known mythologies: Norse, Celtic, Indian, Persian, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, African, Mayan, Aztecan, Native American mythologies, to name a few.

PHAETON

Leitmotif

- A leitmotif is a recurring musical theme in a piece of music that is associated with a character, place or idea.

- Although usually a short melody, it can also be a chord progression or even a simple rhythm.

Leitmotifs bind a work together into a coherent whole.

They enable the composer to relate a story without the use of words, or to add an extra layer to an existing narrative.

In the ballet *Cinderella*, Prokofiev uses leitmotifs to depict character, emotion, and setting. Another work of his that uses leitmotifs is Peter and the Wolf.

Cinderella runs as the clock chimes midnight.

Leitmotifs are varied through changes in elements such as tempo, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, pitch.

These changes convey what a character feels or how they react.

Or, it could be the mood of the setting is altered, for example the mood could go from benign to menacing, or from day to night.

Mendelssohn uses a variety of motifs in his *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* that depict various human and magical characters, emotional confusion, and the woods in the middle of the night. All these themes together capture a blend of the supernatural and the ordinary.

Leitmotifs in music correspond to archetypes—recurring symbols or motifs—in myths and fairy tales.

In Tchaikovsky's score to the ballet *Swan Lake*, the swan maiden Odette's theme is an example of a leitmotif that corresponds to a fairy tale archetype of the vulnerable, captive maiden.

- Carl Maria von Weber was the first composer to make extensive use of leitmotifs.

- The composer most frequently associated with leitmotifs is Richard Wagner.

- Wagner used Leitmotifs in an innovative way, creating what he called "music dramas."

- His goal was to unify text, drama and music into a single, integrated artistic and aesthetic experience.

- His work *Ring of the Nibelungens* makes effective use of leitmotifs in this fashion.

- Composers of movie music such as John Williams and Howard Leslie Shore took this technique and applied it to their scores.

- We see the integration of music and dramatic action vividly in their movies, *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*.

- Television also uses symphonic music and leitmotifs, an example is Ramin Djawadi's score for *Game of Thrones*.

- Video games also use music to enhance the player's experience.

JOHN WILLIAMS
Born in New York, NY 1932

Main Theme from *Star Wars*
Composed in 1977

The music to *Star Wars* was created as a film score, and was written specifically to accompany George Lucas's movie.

When movies first appeared, they were silent. However, live music was performed to accompany the movie as it was shown.

Charlie Chaplin with the Abe Lyman Orchestra (and a bear) during a production of his movie *The Gold Rush*. The movie premiered in 1925 and the score that accompanied it was written by Rumanian-born Carli D. Elinor.

Chaplin was known for his musicality, and he collaborated with arrangers on the scores for many of his movies. To the right is an iconic image from *The Gold Rush*.
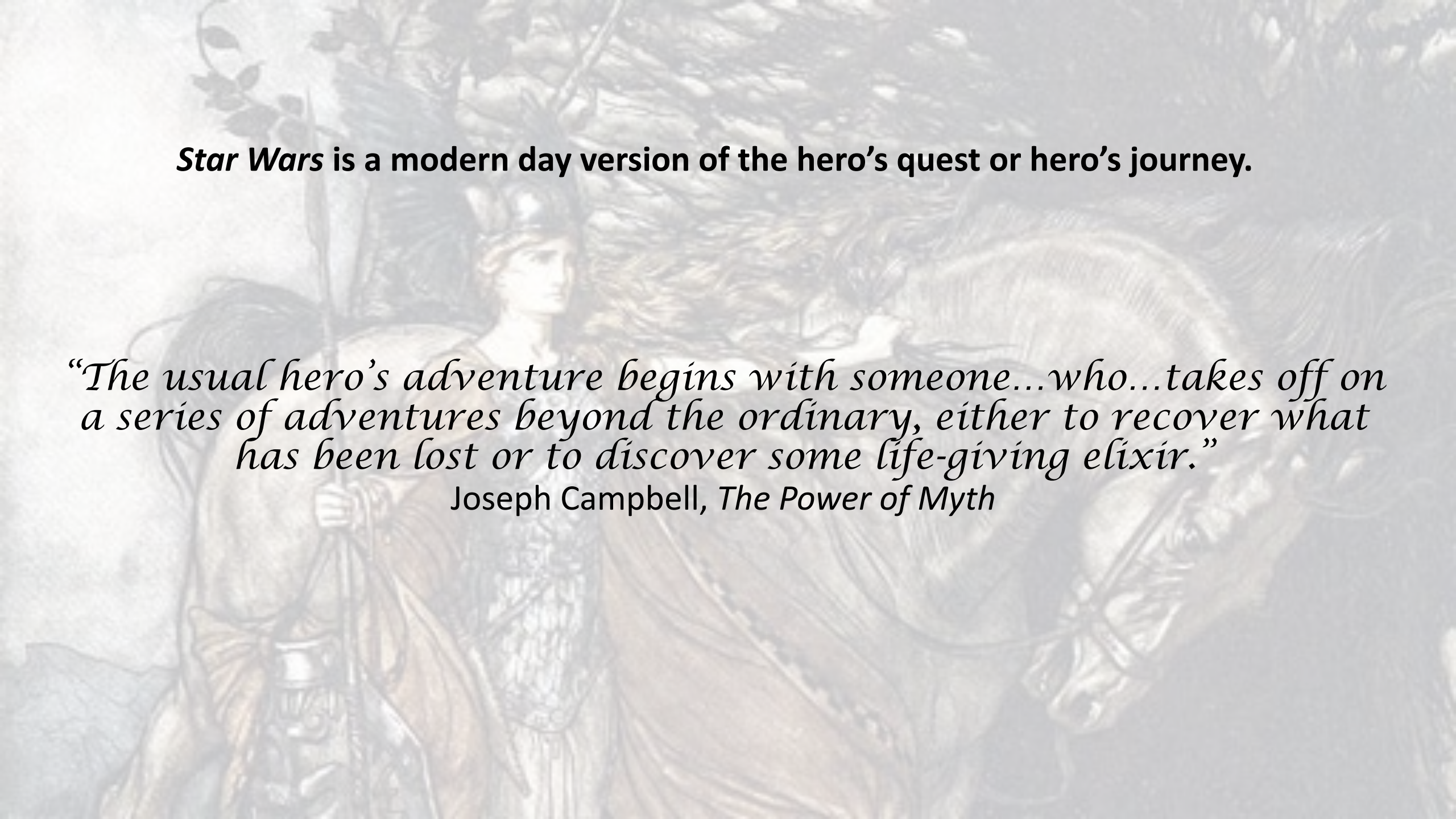

With the advent of recorded sound technology, movie images and music were integrated and synchronized so the music matched the action taking place on screen.

John Williams wrote the original music for all seven *Star War* films.

All of the movies share the same main theme, And, many leitmotifs also. For example there are themes for:

- Characters such as Darth Vader

- Places such as the desert, or space itself

- Ideas such as The Force

- And, feelings such as courage

Star Wars is a modern day version of the hero's quest or hero's journey.

"The usual hero's adventure begins with someone...who...takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir."
Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

The Hero's Journey:
I.   Departure or Separation
II. Initiation or Descent
III. The Return or Enlightenment

The hero is summoned, called to adventure to "...a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state...a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delighted."

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

The Archetypes:
1. Hero
2. Mentor
3. Threshold Guardian
4. Herald
5. Shapeshifter
6. Shadow
7. Trickster

Listening Guide

Using the playlist linked below, listen to the following excerpts and discuss how the music reflects the characters of the movie.

[Playlist link](#)

Themes

- Luke's Theme (The Hologram) - This theme starts at about 2:22
- Vader's Theme
- Princess Leia's Theme - Heard first in the Horn at 0:15 then flute at 1:30
- Yoda's Theme
- Rey's Theme
- Duel of the Fates
- The Throne Room

Learning Activities

#1
View the movie without sound. How does that affect what you are seeing? Now, listen with the sound. What does music add to the story? Individually or in groups create musical accompaniment to a scene in the movie.

#2
Identify another legendary hero from literature or movies. Produce a list of qualities that this character possesses. Then do the same thing for a villain or other contrasting character. Compose a short melody and assign instruments for each character based on these qualities. Then play the two melodies back to back or in an ABA form to make your own film score!

#3
Listen to other John Williams film scores such as Harry Potter or Raiders of the Lost Ark. See if you can pick out the themes for the different characters, and why Williams chose to orchestrate them the way he did. For instance, compare Luke Skywalker's theme in Star Wars to Darth Vader's Imperial March. How are they different? How do they embody the two characters, one good, and one evil?

Illustrator Boris Zvorykin's interpretation of Baba Yaga from "Vassilissa the Beautiful."

Create your own character motifs and alter tempo and dynamics to reflect different moods, actions or situations.

Create whole scenes and show how the motifs are influenced by what is taking place.

Have the motifs interact with each other, altering each other through the interaction.

Further Explorations

[Lord of the Rings](#)

Learn how composer Howard Shore uses leitmotifs in the music for *Lord of the Rings.*

[Star Wars](#)

A behind the scenes look at John Williams as he creates and records music for Star Wars Episode .

Images
In order of appearance

All Space Images: NASA, ESA/Hubble and the Hubble Heritage Team.

Rackham, Arthur. Illustrator. "Loge feigns fear as Alberich turns into a giant snake. Wotan stands in the background." Originally appeared in *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie.* By Richard Wagner NY: Doubleday, 1910.

Unknown, "Phaeton, son of Helios, driving his father's Chariot,. Originally appeared in *The Book of Myths.* By Amy Cruse. London: George G. Harrap, 1925.

Rackham, Arthur. Illustrator. "Siegfried leaves Brünnhilde in search of adventure." Originally appeared in *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods.* By Richard Wagner , NY: Doubleday, 1924.

Harbour, Jennie. Illustrator. Originally appeared in *Cinderella*, Eric Vredenburg, Editor, *My Book of Favorite Fairy Tales*. London: Raphael Tuck & Sons, 1921

Rackham , Arthur. "The Meeting of Oberon and Titania", created but unused for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, NY: Doubleday, 1908.

Décor for Act II of *Swan Lake*. Design by F. Gaanen. Moscow, 1877.

Pierina Legnani as Odette in Marius Petipa nad Lev Ivanov's revival of *Swan Lake.* St. Petersburg, 1895.

Rackham, Arthur. Illustrator. ""I flee for the first time / And am pursued: / Warfather follows close / … / He nears,
he nears, in fury! / Save this woman! / Sisters, your help!" Originally appeared in *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie.* By Richard Wagner NY: Doubleday, 1910.

John Williams conducting from the Hollywood Reporter, January 14, 2016.

Charlie Chaplin. On set of *The Gold Rush*, 1925.

Charlie Chaplin. Publicity still. *The Gold Rush*. 1925

Böcklin, Arnold, *Odysseus and Polyphemus*, 1896, oil and tempura on panel, 66 cm x 150 cm. Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Zvorykin, Boris*. Story Title Page, "Vassilissa the Beautiful,"* 1925, gouache, metallic inks, and black ink, heightened with white, over graphite, 34.6cm x 26.9cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Thomas H. Guinzburg, The Viking Press, 1979.