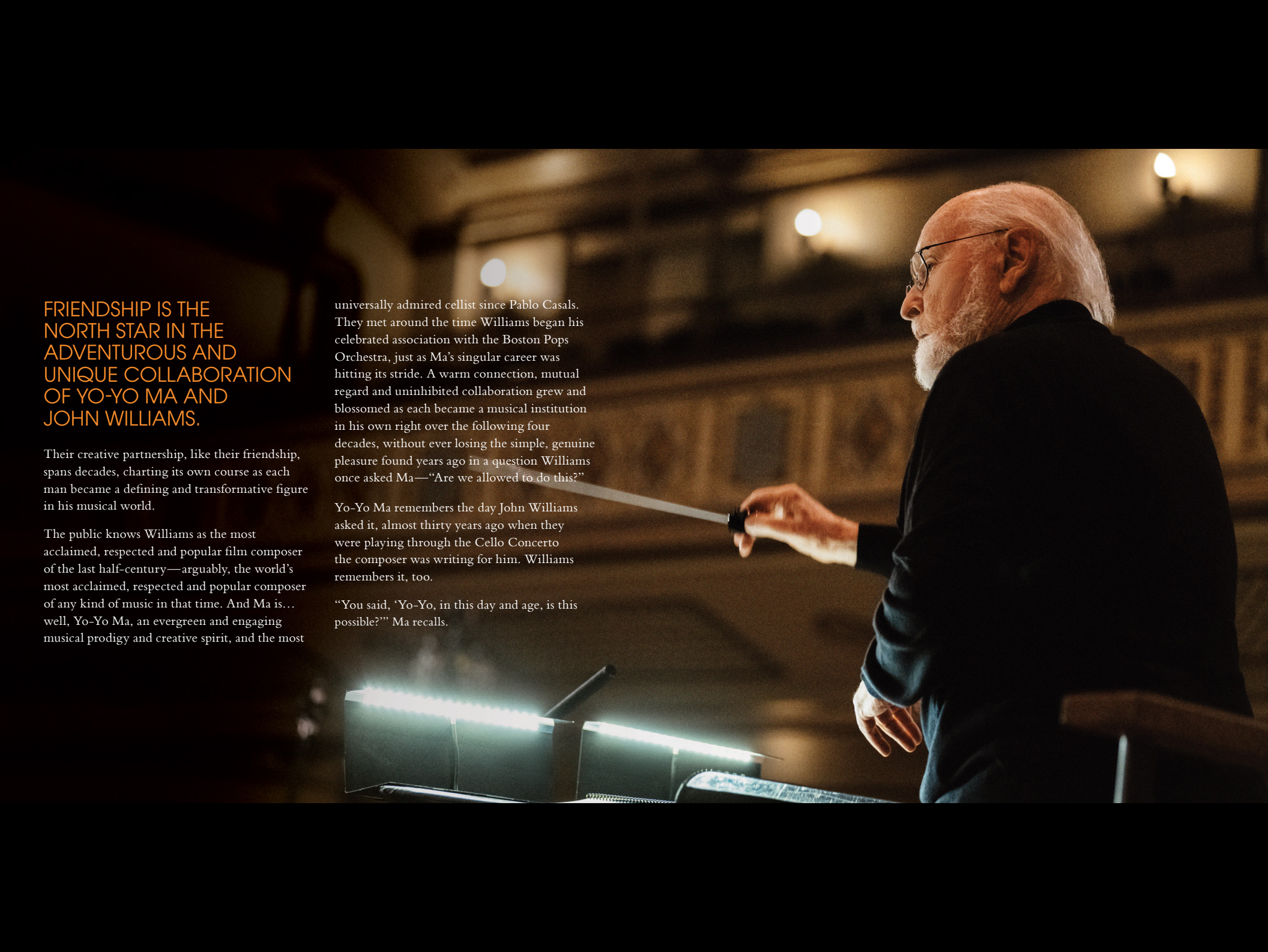


JOHN WILLIAMS YO-YO MA

A GATHERING
OF FRIENDS



NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
PABLO SÁINZ-VILLEGAS
JESSICA ZHOU



FRIENDSHIP IS THE NORTH STAR IN THE ADVENTUROUS AND UNIQUE COLLABORATION OF YO-YO MA AND JOHN WILLIAMS.

Their creative partnership, like their friendship, spans decades, charting its own course as each man became a defining and transformative figure in his musical world.

The public knows Williams as the most acclaimed, respected and popular film composer of the last half-century—arguably, the world's most acclaimed, respected and popular composer of any kind of music in that time. And Ma is... well, Yo-Yo Ma, an evergreen and engaging musical prodigy and creative spirit, and the most

universally admired cellist since Pablo Casals. They met around the time Williams began his celebrated association with the Boston Pops Orchestra, just as Ma's singular career was hitting its stride. A warm connection, mutual regard and uninhibited collaboration grew and blossomed as each became a musical institution in his own right over the following four decades, without ever losing the simple, genuine pleasure found years ago in a question Williams once asked Ma—"Are we allowed to do this?"

Yo-Yo Ma remembers the day John Williams asked it, almost thirty years ago when they were playing through the Cello Concerto the composer was writing for him. Williams remembers it, too.

"You said, 'Yo-Yo, in this day and age, is this possible?'" Ma recalls.



What prompted Williams' question was an expressive theme he had written for the Cello Concerto's fourth movement, a melody so direct and affecting that Ma remembered Williams asking it "as if we were not allowed to do that."

The impulsive dare and the camaraderie in that exchange might be a metaphor for the enduring relationship they enjoy. Individually and together, Ma and Williams transcend the hard choices—pop versus classical, art versus entertainment, serious versus fun—that tend to define music in this age. From their first encounters, each recognized in the other an understanding that, as Williams simply puts it, "music is our oxygen."

Reuniting for this recording, they have revisited the Cello Concerto, this time with the New York Philharmonic. Together, they premiered it at Tanglewood in 1994, and they first recorded it in 2001. After revisions and adjustments over the years as it was performed again and again, the Cello Concerto is being heard here in a new version for the first time. The melody that so struck the composer and the soloist thirty years ago has been transformed in the new version, so that it turns—in Ma's words—"the whole last movement into one glorious song, endless, spinning and spinning, spinning to the very end."

Williams and Ma have frequently met on the concert stage, often performing music the

composer was inspired to write for the cellist. In 2005, Ma was the cello soloist in Williams' Oscar®-nominated score for film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and he has performed and recorded music from other film scores by Williams.

For this recording, the composer has made new arrangements to feature Ma, with the New York Philharmonic, in three excerpts from his Oscar®-winning score for *Schindler's List* and "With Malice Toward None" from *Lincoln*, which evokes the humane spirit of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. To conclude the recording, "A Prayer for Peace" from Williams' score for *Munich* is heard in a duo arrangement he created for Ma and the Spanish guitarist Pablo Sáinz-Villegas.

All three of those scores, for films directed by Steven Spielberg, are contemporary with the genesis and the journey of the Cello Concerto. So is the other concert work heard here—*Highwood's Ghost*, a playful, haunting piece written for the 2018 centennial of Leonard Bernstein's birth and premiered at Tanglewood that summer. Williams wrote the work with solo roles for Ma and Jessica Zhou, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's principal harp, who joins them for this recording.

Williams' ability as a composer to move freely between writing music for films and writing for the concert hall is not unique, but he does both with integrity and a signature sound.



His music may be rooted in tonality, tradition and a generous gift for melody, but it can freely employ stringent modern techniques and ear-bending instrumental textures, whether it is in a concert piece or one of the *Star Wars* scores. He is the same composer, a sure and rigorous craftsman first wherever he is working, guided by a precision of purpose, balanced by inspiration and taste.

When Ma asked Williams how his themes came about—either in the Cello Concerto or in *Schindler's List*—the composer did not have a specific answer. Inspiration, for a serious composer, usually emerges from the application of craft and purpose. He remembered thinking that the melody of “Remembrances” would emerge as the primary theme of *Schindler's List*, but director Steven Spielberg kept returning to the simpler melody that became the film’s musical signature.

“It needs to speak to you right away,” Williams says of writing a theme for a film. “If it’s something that’s enormously long or complicated, it probably won’t work as well as something that is motivically solid. Maybe it has to be simple—simplicity being the very hardest thing ever to settle on.”

Ma’s interpretation of that is his belief in Williams’ “ability to never overdo and never underdo”—that the composer “essentializes” in music what inspires him.

In that, the abiding presence of Leonard Bernstein seems to loom over this collaboration and this recording. As it does with Ma and Williams, the Tanglewood Festival in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts had a special meaning for Bernstein, a place of renewal and inspiration each summer. When Williams was asked to write a piece for the Bernstein centennial at Tanglewood, he remembered a legendary encounter Bernstein had with a ghost that is reputed to reside in Highwood Manor House on the Tanglewood grounds. That story became the inspiration—with Ma and Jessica Zhou as the literally haunting soloists—for *Highwood's Ghost*, subtitled “An Encounter for Cello, Harp and Orchestra,” and heard here with the New York Philharmonic, an orchestra that is integral to Bernstein’s musical legacy.

Mutual respect and affection were common to Yo-Yo Ma, John Williams and Leonard Bernstein, artists of three different generations, each of whose careers overlapped while creating a distinctive and original musical experience that has touched the world. And Bernstein’s spirit might well have been there and approving that day when Williams asked Ma, “Are we allowed to do this?”—to be answered across the years with a resounding “Yes!”

—David Foil



MUSIC COMPOSED AND CONDUCTED BY
John Williams

PRODUCED BY
John Williams

CELLO SOLOIST
Yo-Yo Ma

GUITAR SOLOIST
Pablo Sáinz-Villegas

HARP SOLOIST
Jessica Zhou

ASSOCIATE CONDUCTOR
Edwin Outwater

MUSIC EDITOR
Ramiro Belgardt

MUSIC RECORDED AND MIXED BY
Shawn Murphy at Manhattan Center,
New York City, September 9 to 11, 2021

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and 20th Century Fox Studios

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