

January 26, 2015

Hearing Gender in George Lucas's Galaxy

Kendra Leonard (Loveland, OH)

George Lucas's *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* was the movie hit of 1977. Its score, composed by John Williams, was equally popular, winning the Oscar for Best Film Score and three Grammy awards; the American Film Institute even declared it the greatest American movie score of all time. Parts of the soundtrack were disco-fied for the radio parties, and since its initial release, the soundtrack has never been out of print. In fact, Twentieth Century Fox Film Scores, RCA Victor, and Sony Classical have created several re-releases of the soundtrack containing new material, interviews, and other extras. *Star Wars*' music has become iconic: you can get a ringtone of the [Imperial motif](#), and I've seen wedding receptions where the newlyweds enter to the [film's main theme](#). But what does the music of the movie convey about its characters, their roles in the film, and their genders?

The film begins with the main theme—up-tempo, written in a major key—playing in the background as [scrolling text brings moviegoers into the world of the story](#). Originally titled “war drums,” it was inspired by Gustav Holst's “[Mars](#)” (from *The Planets*) and Erich Korngold's main theme from the film *King's Row* ([listen to a comparison of it and the *Star Wars* theme](#)). The opening, full of the courageous sounds of high brass, suggests that Princess Leia will be the hero: she's a leader in the rebellion against the evil Galactic Empire, and her ship carries secret plans that will help the rebels destroy the Empire's new space station, the Death Star. The gallant music of the opening continues as the film cuts to Leia's ship, [under attack from an Imperial battleship](#).

As Darth Vader enters Leia's ship, the low brass and minor key of the infamous Imperial motif contrast with the main theme's sense of heroism and intrepidity. With this music, Vader's appearance, and the deep, menacing tone of his voice, we know we have our villain. Deep bass voices, like Vader's, often represent the evilness of characters in opera ([Duke Bluebeard in Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*](#) and [Osmin in Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*](#)), musicals ([The Dentist in *Little Shop of Horrors*](#)), and on screen ([Scar's voice in *The Lion King*](#)). The same goes for the music used to signify such characters: the low brass and strings herald [the appearance of The Commendatore](#), come to take the Don to hell, in *Don Giovanni*; [the low background music, created by low brass \(trombone, tuba, and horns\), low winds \(bassoon and contrabassoon\), low strings \(celli and basses\), and timpani in *Legend*](#), where Tim Curry, as the Devil, talks about his desire to kill a unicorn; or [the music for *Aladdin's Jafar*](#), set in a minor key and using low, abrupt “stinger” chords in the full orchestra.

A third musical theme emerges as Princess Leia inserts a recording disc into R2D2. Completely unlike the first two, [Leia's theme](#) isn't bold or plucky. It's soft—played on upper woodwinds like the oboe and flute—and chromatic, less harmonically obvious than either the main theme or the Imperial motif. Leia's theme, in contrast to that of the earlier themes, contains musical lines that could wander off into new directions, rather than marching straight-forwardly as those for the Empire and Luke do.

All three themes reappear throughout the movie. Any time one of the lead male characters does something heroic, we hear the main theme: when Luke rescues Leia from her cell on the Death Star; when Luke, with the help of C3PO and R2D2, stops the trash compactor on the Death Star; and when Leia gives Han Solo and Luke their medals. This music is for the “good guys”—Luke and Han (and Chewbacca), who have led the Rebels to victory in destroying the Death Star. We learn early on that the Imperial motif is the music for the “bad guys”—Vader and his men (and note that they are all men). It plays, for example, when Obi-Wan

Kenobi tells Luke of Anakin's fall and when Darth Vader's stormtroopers march around the Death Star. We also hear Leia's theme in several places: when she pleads for Obi-Wan to help her and the Rebel troops; when she pleads with Vader not to destroy Alderaan, her home planet; when she flirts with Han Solo and Luke Skywalker; and at the end of the movie, after she has distributed medals to Han and Luke, acting as a benevolent representative of a grateful people.

This is a very brief and somewhat simplified analysis of the soundtrack to *Star Wars*, but we've just discovered some important things nonetheless: that men and women are treated differently in terms of music in *Star Wars*. Leia, though a major character, isn't the hero after all. In fact, she's destined to serve two purposes: to be rescued, and to be a heterosexual love interest for the two human heroes. This is a prime example of gendered music, or music that is written to contrast male and female characters by their gender.

Gendered music isn't new. It's been around for a long time, and doesn't need to represent actual characters on screen to stage to exist. During the Baroque, Classic, and Romantic periods of music history, people thought pieces of music had "masculine" and "feminine" themes: the feminine theme resisted the domination of the masculine theme, but, being feminine and weak, was eventually overcome by the masculine theme.¹ "Masculine" music—just like the music for the "good guys" in *Star Wars*—tended to be medium- or fast-paced, in a major key, and harmonically easy for the ear to follow. If a composer was writing for orchestra, the inclusion of the brass and the low strings also made music "masculine." "Masculine" music could be in minor keys too, as we hear in Vader's music, and there it was meant to be dark and brooding and possibly violent. "Feminine" music, on the other hand, was often slower and moved between major and minor keys more frequently. Chromatic notes supposedly provided a musical mirror for women's changeable natures. High strings and winds were commonly used to represent the high, feminine voice. The title character in George Bizet's opera *Carmen*, for example, is known for her "[slithery, slippery" voice and manner that seduces all the men who hear it.](#)²In *The Little Mermaid*, [the sea witch Ursula has a similar singing voice.](#)

The Royal Opera House performs "Habanera" in Francesca Zambello's vivid production of Carmen, by George Bizet.

An enormous amount of music tries to represent gender. Sacred music, opera, chamber music, symphonies, rock, the blues, pop, country music—you can find examples in all of it. Now that we've thought about *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, go watch a little bit of other *Star Wars* movies, or any favorite movie. How is the music for men and women different? In *Snow White*, how does [this music for the hardworking dwarfs](#) contrast with Snow White's [yearning for her prince to come](#)? [Here is the Commendatore](#) from *Don Giovanni*; how does his music compare with [that of Donna Anna](#)? How does [this proposition to a woman by ZZTop](#) differ from "[Call Me Maybe](#)" by Carly Rae Jepsen?

There's an enormous body of music, writing, and commentary about women to explore. You now have some tools to help you think about how women are involved in music, use music, and are signified by music. Every time you hear a new song, or go to a concert, or watch a film, listen closely: what does the music tell us about the women who created it or are referenced in it, and what does that say to us about those women?

For Discussion

1. In the last movie or tv show you saw, what kinds of songs or instrumental music were used for the men and women?

2. What are some songs or pieces of music that flip this gendering upside down? What music can you think of that uses “masculine” music to depict a woman or “feminine” music for a man?
3. How is music for children gendered? At what age(s) are children assigned music for the “feminine” or “masculine”?

¹ Susan C. Cook and Judy Tsou, eds., *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 19.

² Karin Pendle, ed., *Women and Music: a History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5.

Posted on January 26, 2015 in [Features](#), [Music and Culture](#), [Popular Music](#)