

John Williams' spry presence brings Tanglewood on Parade crowd to its feet

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LENOX >> On a clear and starry night for the annual celebration of All Things Tanglewood, the mere sight of the revered composer John Williams brought the capacity crowd in the Shed to its feet before he conducted a note.

At 84, Williams remains a spry presence and a Tanglewood on Parade enthusiast, as he told the audience: "Of all the traditions here, this one is the best." It's worth noting that the showcase for the Boston Symphony, Boston Pops and student performers yields handsome proceeds as a benefit for the BSO's summer institute, the Tanglewood Music Center.

The Boston Pops Conductor Laureate sounded nearly giddy as he chatted briefly about excerpts from his 2015 score for "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," noting that it's a joy for a "frustrated composer" to present the music without the soundtrack's

high-decibel special effects.

He also led the Pops in all three minutes of the stirring "Of Grace and Majesty," originally known as "A Hymn to New England" when it accompanied a 1987 big-screen IMAX travelogue. It's a typical Williams major-event score, filled with pomp and circumstance.

A world-premiere suite based on his 27th and most recent cinematic collaboration with close friend Steven Spielberg, "The BFG" (Big Friendly Giant), was a whimsical delight, tripping the light fantastic along the lines of "a child's ballet, an amazingly musical and choreographic sequence which required the orchestra to do things that are more associated with musical films," as Williams has described it.

For the crowd that appeared to number perhaps 12,000, the gala evening concert — clocking in at two hours 20 minutes, followed by fireworks — guest conductor Stéphane Denève, a familiar presence here in recent years, also scored a hit as he led the TMC Orchestra in a whirlwind romp through Ravel's "La Valse."

From the misty yet oddly menacing opening for double basses to the off-the-beat freneticism of the final moments, Denève was in his element, inspiring the young players to capture the essence of Ravel's macabre, balletic score. The composer denied that the work, written two years after the end of World War I, represents the crumbling of European civilization, as was assumed after its premiere.

Michael Gandolfi took well-deserved bows following a lively BSO excursion on his "Night Train to Perugia," commissioned as a six-minute concert opener for Tanglewood's 75th anniversary in 2012. The music captures the sound world of a subatomic railway ride that passes under the Italian city — complete with train whistles, horns and the click-clacking of the tracks, climaxing with tubular bells marking the arrival in the underground station in the Grand Sasso mountains.

Stefan Asbury, head of the TMC's conducting program, served effectively as the performance's engineer, steering the orchestra on full-throttle.

Mozart is rarely encountered at Tanglewood on Parade, but his engaging, easy-listening Flute and Harp Concerto displayed the virtuoso skills of the BSO's principal flutist, Elizabeth Rowe, and harpist Jessica Zhou. BSO Assistant Conductor Ken-David Masur led a lithe, expressive accompaniment.



Eighty-four-year-old Boston Pops Conductor Laureate John... (hilary scott — courtesy bso)

The annual celebration, which included daytime performances by high-school age Boston University Tanglewood Institute musicians and TMC pianists, cellists and vocalists, is the ultimate family-friendly event, with hundreds of youngsters on the grounds sampling musical instruments and marveling at the magic of strolling entertainer Bonaparté. The Berkshire Hills Chorus of Sweet Adelines serenaded early-evening picnickers enjoying a simple repast or a bountiful al fresco banquet on the Lawn.

Ending the evening, as always, the pot boiled on high as guest conductor Giancarlo Guerrero whipped the 200 or so players of the combined BSO and TMCO into a paroxysm of cannon fire, chimes and brass climaxing Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture."

The composer famously described it as "very loud and noisy, but without artistic merit, because I wrote it without warmth and without love."

Exactly. But audiences love it, so once a year, it must be endured. A small price to pay for an annual event that just might attract much-needed converts to classical music, which needs all the support it can get.