

CLASSICAL MUSIC INDY

# NOTE

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**Music  
in Film**

A green-tinted image of a Godzilla statue, likely from the 1954 original film, positioned in the background. The statue is shown from the side, facing right, with its mouth open as if roaring. A small, stylized red flame icon is located in the upper right corner of the image.

FROM A TERRIFYING VILLAIN  
TO A KIDDY MATINEE HERO,

# GODZILLA

INSPIRED ONE OF JAPAN'S  
MOST REVERED COMPOSERS.

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*by Crystal Hammon*

What happens when you pair the most dangerous year in a lifetime with the world's longest running movie franchise? You get Godzilla, history's most dangerous movie monster — with a few altruistic exceptions.

The original Godzilla was made by Toho Studios in Japan during the late 1940s, but the film wasn't released until 1954, two years after the end of American occupation following World War II.

For the unindoctrinated, the anti-hero Godzilla is always portrayed as the byproduct of human failure or atrocity. In the 1954 original, the first in a franchise of 36 Godzilla films, the monster is the presumed result of the atomic bomb America detonated in 1945 against Japan. Shamed by the movie's unveiled reference to a radioactive monster (Godzilla) bent on destroying Japan, America understood that it was being cast as a villain and prevented Toho Studios from releasing the film when it was ready.

"The Godzilla of the 1950s was bad, bad, bad," says Michael Schelle, Ph.D., professor of music at Butler University and composer with expertise in the history of film music and Japanese music. "But Godzilla is good during the 1960s and 1970s. He is friendly, and he tries to protect Tokyo from all the other monsters that are being created by smog and air pollution. In some of the movies, you even hear the cast yelling 'He's here! He's here to save us!'" After Godzilla's good-guy era, he returns to the role of the villain and remains so in most subsequent films.

To score the music for Godzilla, Toho Studios picked Akira Ifukube, a prolific composer of concert music and music professor who taught at two different universities in Japan and became president of a third near the end of his career. "Ifukube is considered the dean of Japanese composers," says Schelle, who authored *The Score*:

*Interviews with Film Composers.* "When he got the gig for Godzilla, he sort of said, 'Well, I'm not a film composer, but that sounds fun.'"

Ifukube built a reputation as a composer of classical compositions for orchestras and string quartets after winning first prize in a 1935 competition for young composers, but it was his pivot to film scores in 1947 that made him famous. He wrote the scores for 300 to 400 movies, including 28 Godzilla films. The scores for more recent Godzilla films often use elements of the original Ifukube themes as nostalgic recognition of Ifukube's work.

His ascent to fame was circuitous. Ifukube studied violin as a child and composed music as a teenager, but for many years, music was a passion pursued outside a full-time job as a forestry officer. Ironically, Ifukube only turned to music as a career after being exposed to radiation through a project he was asked to do by the Japanese Imperial Army, according to one of his online biographies.

Although it was not uncommon in Europe and Asia, very few American concert composers from Ifukube's era were involved in film music, according to Schelle. "Aaron Copland did a couple of movie scores from the 1930s through 1950s, but most composers were in one discipline of music or the other," he says. "Of course, there's a lot more crossover in the past three decades, but when I was growing up as a composer, the message was still, 'Don't do that unless you want to sell out.' There's a much healthier attitude now."

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Ifukube's Godzilla compositions follow three basic themes, recycled throughout most of the 32 Japanese-made films. One is very martial-like music any time there is a military presence on screen or when Godzilla stomps through a scene. A second motif accompanies action-packed scenes. Schelle compares the third theme to a requiem. "It's very slow, very beautiful, very heartbreaking," he says. "And for decades, he would use a gorgeous, slow requiem at the end when Godzilla would die, even though Godzilla always came back for another sequel."

The lineage of ownership in the Godzilla franchise(s) is a confusing mix of players. During the early 1990s, Toho Studios sold the rights to Godzilla to Sony, resulting in a handful of disappointing, American-made films. In 2003, Toho Studios reacquired the rights, then worked out agreements that have allowed Warner Brothers and Legendary Entertainment to make Godzilla films such as the 2021 release of *Godzilla vs. Kong*, with music by Tom Holkenborg, a Dutch composer.

Schelle says many of the recent Hollywood scores have been underwhelming compared with the music of Ifukube and the Japanese composers who eventually replaced him. "They don't have the personality that some of the Japanese Godzilla scores have," he says. "When Ifukube passed the torch in the 1970s and 1980s, so often the Japanese composers that followed him would still reference those original Godzilla themes and leitmotifs — some more than others, but they would always pop up," he says.

The reason for that, Schelle speculates, could be largely cultural: Japanese culture is one that honors elders. Ifukube was a beloved composer who received his country's highest honor as Person of Cultural Merit before his death in 2006. ■

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### **Schelle's Movie Tip:**

*Purchase or rent the 1954 original version of Godzilla, a beautifully remastered version made by The Criterion Collection.*





# The Waterphone

THE INSTRUMENT HOLLYWOOD COMPOSERS  
DEPEND ON TO CREEP YOU OUT

by Crystal Hammon

Imagine yourself watching a horror movie. You're suddenly aware that something very sinister or unnatural is about to happen, alerted by a very distinct musical sound, a sound that's so ubiquitous in horror films that it's almost cliché. The obscure musical instrument that often marks moments of suspense and mystery in film was invented in 1967 by the artist, composer and percussionist Richard Waters. It's called a waterphone.

Evoking a range of emotions, from wonder to terror, from heaven to hell and back again, the waterphone's versatility quickly won favor

among composers of musicals and film scores. It makes an appearance in *Poltergeist*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, *The Matrix*, *Jurassic Park* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and many other films. "Almost all of John Williams' scores call for a waterphone," says Rick Dior, a professor of percussion at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, and owner of two waterphones, handcrafted by Waters.

In 2009 Dior played percussion for a Broadway tour of *Wicked* in Charlotte. The touring company had a cheap knockoff of



Waters' original waterphone. Aware of the differences between the two, Dior brought his authentic waterphones to rehearsal. "At the end of one of these pieces, there's a big waterphone solo," Dior says. "After I played the solo, the conductor looked up at me and asked, 'What was *that*?' I said, 'That's a real waterphone.' He [the conductor] was speechless."

The waterphone is the instrumental trifecta of a Tibetan water drum, an African kalimba and a 16th-century peg or nail violin. Its otherworldly sound stems from a unique design, which Waters guarded jealously until his patent expired in the 1980s. Made with a stainless-steel diaphragm and brass tines, the instrument is tuned to microtonal and diatonic scales that are more typical in Eastern music. The waterphone's name refers to the fact that the diaphragm can be filled with water, and its pitch can be adjusted by the amount of water added.

Although cheaper models are available, many musicians say that an original waterphone, which can cost between \$1,100 and \$1,700 each, is unrivaled. The band Aerosmith and singer Tom Waits are among the musicians who became devotees of Waters' invention. Despite his invention's fan base, Richard Waters had little interest in marketing the waterphone, according to his daughter, Rayme. The instrument's popularity among global musicians spread by word of mouth and the growth of the internet.

Now a novelist who lives in Palo Alto, California, Rayme Waters recalls taking phone calls from famous musicians who wanted to order waterphones. Her father was unfazed by messages from the rich and famous, including one left by a well-known English band: "Oh, that's really long

distance," he said dismissively. "They'll have to call me back." She remembers thinking, "I would call them back if I were you, and I'm only 14 years old."

Years later, Waters attempted to interest his daughter in the business, hoping she might continue his legacy. Rayme Waters demurred, but after her father's death in 2013, she had second thoughts. "When somebody dies, everything takes on larger meaning, so I took a welding class," she says. "As it turns out, I'm a pretty good welder, but I just didn't have the passion for it." She eventually sold the business to its current owner, Brooks Hubbert, a musician and metalworker from Pensacola, Florida.

Percussionist Emil Richards was one of the first to introduce the waterphone to Hollywood. Blurring the lines between sound design and music, Richards influenced many composers with the diverse arsenal of sound he brought to his work, including the waterphone. Before his death in 2019, Richards donated a waterphone from his personal collection to the Rhythm! Discovery Center in downtown Indianapolis.

"One of the reasons instruments like this [the waterphone] remain anonymous is that percussion is, by its nature, sort of anonymous in how it's credited," says Rob Funkhouser, an Indianapolis composer and percussionist who serves as the operations and education manager at the Rhythm! Discovery Center. "It's just part of a percussionist's job to pull things out of our hats." One of the beauties of the instrument: practically anyone can play a waterphone by plucking, bowing or using a mallet to strike the brass tines. "The concept of virtuosity is not really relevant to the waterphone," he says.

*To learn more about the waterphone, listen to the Every Little Thing podcast, where you can hear Rayme Waters speak about her father's invention. You can also hear Brooks Hubbert demonstrate an original waterphone on his YouTube channel.*