John Williams  (b.1932)
“Highwood’s Ghost,” An Encounter for Harp, Cello, and Orchestra
for Jessica Zhou and Yo-Yo Ma (2018)

This is the world premiere performance of “Highwood’s Ghost,” which was composed especially for this summer’s Leonard Bernstein centennial celebrations at Tanglewood.

Highwood’s Ghost joins the ranks of John Williams’s ever-growing list of concert works composed for individuals and/or specific occasions. In this case his inspiration is five-fold. The central impetus was to compose a piece celebrating Leonard Bernstein in his centennial year. This also allowed Williams to compose a work—one of several, at this point—also paying tribute to Tanglewood, one of his favorite places. He wrote the piece for the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, whose individual membership changes every year but whose spirit has abided from one summer to the next since the TMC was founded; and for his soloists he chose two musicians whose artistry has inspired him in other works, BSO principal harpist Jessica Zhou and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, another longtime member of the Tanglewood family.

Demonstrably the most beloved, critically acclaimed, and decorated film composer of all time, John Williams is a thoroughlygoing, well-rounded musician whose sixty-plus-year career has encompassed performance as a pianist and conductor, arranging, television and film scoring, and concert music. He was Conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, succeeding Arthur Fiedler, from 1980 to 1993, and has since remained an integral member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra/Boston Pops/Tanglewood family. He currently holds the title Conductor Laureate of the Boston Pops. This summer he conducted his own music with the Pops during Tanglewood’s popular “John Williams’ Film Night” and led the orchestra in the Tanglewood on Parade gala concert.

Illustrating his commitment to Tanglewood’s legacy, Williams commissioned the two Penelope Jencks sculptures on the Tanglewood grounds: the bronze bust of Aaron Copland in the formal garden, and the head of Leonard Bernstein situated in the Highwood manor house. (A sculptural tribute to Serge Koussevitzky has also been commissioned from Ms. Jencks.) Williams himself was celebrated at Tanglewood in 2004, to mark the twenty-fifth year of his association with the BSO, by the planting of a lacebark pine tree, which thrives on the right side of the path leading from the Highwood Gate to the Shed lawn.

Williams’s practice of writing concertos, symphonic works, and chamber music at the request of, or in tribute to, particular musicians of his acquaintance took off in the 1980s after he became conductor of the Boston Pops. He has written several concertos for BSO and BPO members—the Tuba Concerto for former BSO tubist Chester Schmitz, an oboe concerto for Keisuke Wakao, a viola concerto for Cathy Basrak (all three premiered by the Boston Pops), and a harp concerto, On Willows and Birches, for former BSO principal harp Ann Hobson Pilot (premiered by the BSO). Last summer the BSO and Anne-Sophie Mutter gave the world premiere of Williams’s Markings for violin, harp, and strings, written at Mutter’s request. Jessica Zhou was the inspiration for the solo harp part in Markings.

The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra was beneficiary of Williams’s On Willows and Birches, for former BSO principal harp Ann Hobson Pilot (premiered by the BSO). Last summer the BSO and Anne-Sophie Mutter gave the world premiere of Williams’s Markings for violin, harp, and strings, written at Mutter’s request. Jessica Zhou was the inspiration for the solo harp part in Markings. The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra was beneficiary of Williams’s JUST DOWN WEST STREET...on the left, written for the TMC’s 75th-anniversary season. The composer’s collaborations with Yo-Yo Ma are more extensive. The BSO commissioned his Concerto for Cello and Orchestra for Ma, who premiered it with the BSO and Seiji Ozawa during the concert inaugurating Seiji Ozawa Hall in 1994. The cellist later recorded an entire album of Williams’s work, “Yo-Yo Ma Plays the Music of John Williams,” including the concerto; Elegy for cello and orchestra, and Three Pieces for Solo Cello. Ma was also solo cellist for Williams’s soundtrack for the film Memoirs of a Geisha. Yo-Yo Ma has performed all of this music at Tanglewood.

The Tanglewood feature at the center of Williams’s new piece is Highwood Manor House, which the BSO acquired in 1986 from its then owner Mason Harding, a New York City attorney who’d owned it since 1960. BSO staff and catering offices are housed there now, along with a supper club downstairs, and it all seems fairly innocuous. With a house of 150+ years’ vintage, though, there are bound to be stories. One such was the prevailing theory of Highwood’s being haunted—some poltergeist causing the mysteriously running faucets, odd noises, lights going on by themselves, and doors opening and shutting of their own volition. These were recounted afresh in the press after the BSO annexed the Bernstein campus (the part of the Tanglewood grounds on which Highwood, Ozawa Hall, and the forthcoming Tanglewood Learning Institute now stand). It ultimately went far enough that Lois Sharp Wade, the daughter of longstanding Highwood groundskeeper Randall Sharp, felt it necessary to write a rebuttal in a letter to the editor of the Berkshire Eagle in August 1992, in which she stated flatly, “I know for a fact that Highwood is not haunted.” But there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies; there are ghosts and there are ghosts. For those of us who work at Highwood, at Tanglewood, and at Symphony Hall, the idea that spirits waft through and around us is not at all far-fetched.

Highwood’s Ghost is about all these facets of the Tanglewood “spirit,” but derives directly from John Williams’s memories of Leonard Bernstein, who remains present here—or as Williams puts it in his comments on the piece (see below), “The music, as you may notice, is a little haunted by Lenny.” The piece begins in slow, lyrical mode, the
solo harp taking the lead at first before the entrance of the cello. The two soloists work as an accompanied duo thereafter, with relatively sparse orchestral coloring. After this long rhapsodic section, an energetic and rhythmically tricky passage subsides into a sustained, suspended, quiet conclusion.

The composer’s note on *Highwood’s Ghost* appears below.

**ROBERT KIRZINGER**  
Composer/annotator Robert Kirzinger is the BSO’s Associate Director of Program Publications.

Highwood is one of the grand old houses of the Tanglewood campus, which stands today with dignity and grace as it has since 1846.

I well remember one night, as Lenny was making his way up the first stairwell, exclaiming “this place is haunted!” Coincidentally, I’m told that a number of people who worked at the house over the years have also felt Highwood to be haunted. In any case, it may be expected that Lenny, genius that he was, might have had a special ability to receive transmission from the sphere of spirits and signs.

I thought a little piece about this history might be fun, and provide the unusual combination of harp and cello an opportunity to set the stage for an ectoplasmic visit.

The music, as you may notice, is a little haunted by Lenny, but it is not suggested that he is the ghost. You’re invited to listen and make your own guess as to the identity of this seemingly very pleasant spirit… I have my own ideas.

**JOHN WILLIAMS**