

Oscar could be coronation for composer Desplat



By JAKE COYLE, AP Entertainment Writer – Thu Feb 17, 2:41 pm ET



AP – In this undated publicity image released by The Weinstein Co., composer Alexandre Desplat, nominated ...

NEW YORK – In a film where sound is central, Alexandre Desplat's score to "The King's Speech" enters subtly.

A simple melody slinks in, a soft, demure line of hopeful piano notes, fittingly repetitive, like the stuttering speech of the film's main character, George VI (Colin Firth).

"You have to respect the silence," says Desplat, speaking from London where he's working on the score to "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2." "It's quite a challenge to be able to come in in such a delicate way that you're not noticed. I think great scores have to be noticed, but they're wrong when you hear the music come in."

The score, partly recorded with a vintage microphone of George VI's, has earned Desplat his fourth Academy Award nomination. He's regarded as the front-runner in the category ahead of the Feb. 27 Oscars.

A win would be something of a belated coronation for Desplat. Though it wasn't until 2003 that he broke through to Hollywood, the 49-year-old Frenchman has already established himself as one of the most sought after composers in movies.

His scores are remarkably varied, veering from grandly epic to minimalist and intimate, from 80-piece orchestras to lone whistling. He's worked with Stephen Frears, Roman Polanski, David Fincher, Wes Anderson and Jacques Audiard.

"The sound of the music and the images, to me, is something intangible and magical," says Desplat. "I try to sneak into the film with the music, so that it belongs to the film totally."

The son of a French father and Greek mother who met in the U.S. but raised him in France, Desplat was classically trained on piano from age 5. He also became proficient on the flute and trumpet.

He was a young cinephile. At age 6, he recalls being struck by Alex North's score to "Spartacus."

"I never dreamed of writing for concert or opera," says Desplat. "I always dreamed, if I was a composer, to write music for films."

He was particularly moved by scores by Nino Rota, Bernard Herrmann, fellow Frenchman Maurice Jarre ("Lawrence of Arabia") and John Williams, whose "Star Wars" score — its double album poured over — prompted a resolution in Desplat.

"I remember saying to my friends: `That's what I want to do,'" says Desplat.

He began scoring film and television around 1990, working mainly in France. Dialogue-heavy French films, Desplat says, didn't give him the room he craved. 2003's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" introduced him to Hollywood.

Jonathan Glazer's "Birth" (2004) bent yet more ears to Desplat, particularly its magnificent opening scene: An overhead shot of a jogger running through a snowy Central Park, who eventually collapses and dies. Paced by flute, Desplat's score is lush and stirring — somewhat like minimalist John Adams, a distinct influence on Desplat.

Anderson was blown away by the "Birth" score and sought out Desplat for his stop-motion animated "Fantastic Mr. Fox." Desplat's whimsical score has bluegrass influences and pieces like "Whack-Bat

Majorette."

"Alexandre is a French movie star who happens to be one of the world's pre-eminent composers," Anderson said by e-mail. "I do not know if he can act. Also, I feel he may be the flute-playing equivalent of Jimi Hendrix, and he is a great whistler."

For Desplat, scoring a film is a deeply personal task. He holes himself away "like a monk" when writing, pushing himself into "a very obsessive trance." Watching footage from the film endlessly, inspiration can come from anything: the storyline, an actor's face, a camera angle, a lighting style.

"When I think I have found what the music should be, I can feel a vibration as I'm playing the music and watching at the same time," Desplat says. "If you change the music of `Vertigo,' I'm sure the vibration would go away."

For "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," a film in which the main character ages backward, he created musical palindromes. In "New Moon," he reflected Bella's indecision between her two suitors (Edward and Jacob) by blending their themes.

Chris Weitz has worked with Desplat on three very different films: "New Moon," the fantasy epic "The Golden Compass" and the upcoming illegal immigrant drama "A Better Life." He convenes with Desplat at his Montparnasse apartment in Paris, which includes a studio.

"It's kind of sinfully fun," says Weitz. "You're sitting around, every once in a while a cat will wander in and take a seat on the couch. You sit around and talk about the day and life and eat biscuits and sip coffee."

"You get the sense that you're both trying to improve the movie, rather than just knocking around notes," says Weitz.

Desplat was particularly challenged in scoring the much-anticipated "The Tree of Life" (out in May), by the rarely active Terrence Malick. On Malick's wishes, Desplat composed the score without seeing any of the footage, providing music to the director for several years.

It's all an incredible load for any composer, especially one as dedicated as Desplat.

"It's a very, very lucky moment and I don't want to stop that moment," says Desplat. "It's what I dreamed to do, and I want to keep the dream going."