

'Philomena' And The Power Of A Quiet Film Score

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Alex Bailey/Courtesy of the artist

In the 1950s, Philomena Lee was a naive Irish teenager who got pregnant, gave birth in a convent, and was forced by the nuns to sign away her parental rights. The 2013 film *Philomena* is based on what happened five decades later, when Lee went looking for her son with the help of a journalist. Directed by Stephen Frears and starring Judi Dench and Steve Coogan, *Philomena* is up for several Academy Awards, including one in an unlikely category.

French composer [Alexandre Desplat](#) has scored dozens of films, across an astonishing range of styles and genres: *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The King's Speech*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, two *Harry Potter* films. Compared to those efforts, his Oscar-nominated score for *Philomena* is strikingly spare, often falling silent in the moments where the drama is most potent. Desplat says the gravitas of the true story, contrasted with the lightness and humor that Dench brought to her role, made the score one of the hardest he's ever had to write.

"When I saw the film for the first time, it got me so emotional that I when I went back to my studio, I started trying to find what could reflect Judi Dench's character: This fragile, over-70-years-old lady who [shows much more strength than she seems to have](#), who has had a hidden secret for 50 years, and who is capable of forgiveness," Desplat says. "It's difficult to imagine how music can relate to that."

As he tells NPR's Arun Rath, Desplat approached the challenge by framing his score around a persistent theme: one that follows Philomena throughout her journey, changing as she does, and yet respects the story's powerful moments of silence. Hear more of their conversation at the audio link.

ARUN RATH, HOST:

If you get to the movies regularly, you might know the music of our next guest. Alexandre Desplat has scored dozens of films across an astonishing range of styles and genres: "Zero Dark Thirty," "The King's Speech," "Harry Potter" and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." Desplat has been nominated for six Academy Awards. And he's up for an Oscar again, this time for "Philomena."

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RATH: The film tells the true story of a woman named Philomena Lee. In the 1950s, Lee was a naive Irish teenager who knew nothing about sex and got pregnant. She gave birth in a convent, where the nuns forced her to sign away her parental rights. Her son was kept in a home at the convent, and Lee was able to visit him once a day. But when the boy was 3, the nuns sold him for adoption in America.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "PHILOMENA")

SOPHIE KENNEDY CLARK: (As Young Philomena) Anthony. Anthony.

RATH: Five decades later, Philomena Lee, played by Judi Dench, goes looking for her son. And she has the help of a journalist played by Steve Coogan.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "PHILOMENA")

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: (As character) They said that you had abandoned him as a baby.

STEVE COOGAN: (As Martin Sixsmith) She's been looking for him. She spent her whole life trying to find him.

JUDI DENCH: (as Philomena) I did not abandon my child.

RATH: I recently spoke with Alexandre Desplat about how he wrote the music for "Philomena." He told me that the starting point for his score was always the main character.

ALEXANDRE DESPLAT: It's about her and the pain and the loss and this journey through life without her son. But it all goes back to the original scene in which she meets a boy that she will make love with.

RATH: This is where the young Philomena meets the young man at the fair.

DESPLAT: Yes, yes. And you hear in the background a carousel playing.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "PHILOMENA")

D.J. MCGRATH: (As John) I like that dress. Did you make it yourself?

CLARK: (As young Philomena) No. I bought it in a shop. And anyways, my auntie told me I wasn't supposed to speak to strange men like you.

DESPLAT: That's where you hear that melody for the first time. Subliminally, nobody, I hope notices, but there's a melody playing there. And that's the melody you're going to hear again and again through the film, like these ghosts haunting her. There's a ghost in the film, and it's her boy who has disappeared.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RATH: So we feel the character of this woman so strongly in this music and in this theme. But, of course, so much of the marvelous dramatic tension in the film is how utterly different she is from the other main character - this is Steve Coogan, the journalist character. How did you sort of mix their sensibilities musically?

DESPLAT: Well, the great talent of Stephen Frears all through the film - and, of course, of the writer, Jeff Pope and Steve Coogan - was to balance drama - a very tragic drama - and comedy.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DESPLAT: Music can't become too tragic or too dramatic. Otherwise, it just makes the boat tilt to the wrong side. You know, if you tilt too much gravitas, then you kill the comedy. If you - the music is too comedic, it kills the gravitas. It seems easy when you watch a film like this. You think, oh, that's an easy film to score because the music is intimate, there's not a big orchestra. But it's actually, I think, one of the most difficult thing to do.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RATH: How did you work with the director, with Stephen Frears, in terms of figuring out that balance?

DESPLAT: Mm. Well, you know, Stephen, he's already an old companion because it's our fourth movie together since "The Queen." He has an incredible sense of humor. And also, when he chooses a collaborator, he trusts him. Great directors have this talent of picking up people for the crew, which they can trust. And then they just guide them gently as you guide a fast car. You know, they know that you can go somewhere very fast and very well. And if you get a bit off the track, they'd just bring you back to the track, exactly what Stephen does.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RATH: You know, I don't - this sounds smug, in a way, but I was impressed with the Academy for nominating this film, again, because the music is subtle. It's not those music that screams out and is going with, like, flags waving and bells whistling. And it seems as though the music, along with the film, obviously, has really landed with people emotionally.

DESPLAT: The music being recognized by the Academy is, yes, a great deal for me because through the years, I can see that most of the films that get attention are the films where the music is loud, you know, where there's a lot of music and it's crying loud. Sometimes a sparse score is more difficult to do - much more difficult than it seems.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RATH: That's composer Alexandre Desplat. He wrote the Oscar-nominated music for the film "Philomena," and he joined us here in the studio. Alexandre, thank you so much.

DESPLAT: Thank you for hosting me. Thank you.

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