

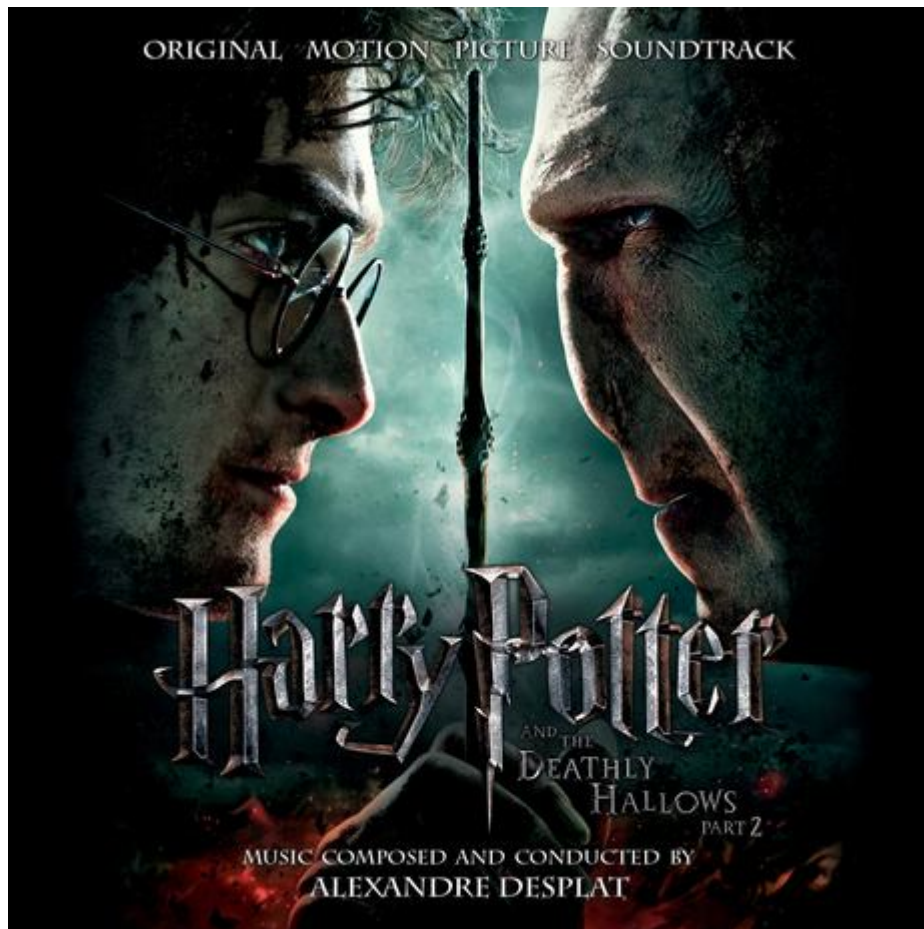
Deceptive Cadence

Alexandre Desplat: Creating Color For Harry Potter

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by ANASTASIA TSIOLUCAS



courtesy of the artist

If you're a filmmaker looking for a smart score, commissioning music from French composer Alexandre Desplat is at the top of your to-do list. For millions of Muggles worldwide, Desplat's music for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II* is sure to become an

integral part of their Pottermania. In its opening weekend, the movie brought in [staggering](#) numbers: \$168.6 million in North America and \$307 million internationally, making for the highest-grossing opening of all time.

Not only has Desplat, 49, penned the scores to the last two Harry Potter films, he's also scored other recent movies in which music plays a central role. These include Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* and Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech*, which won a BAFTA for Best Film Music. Other recent Desplat scores include *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and *The Queen*, as well as popcorn-munchers like *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*.

"My training in music has been very eclectic," Desplat says, "as first a flute player from classical chamber music to jazz, Greek, Brazilian and African music to contemporary concert music." But amongst his influences, perhaps the most surprising is one of the high priests of European modernism, composer [Iannis Xenakis](#).

"Being Greek," Desplat explains, "my mother had recordings of Xenakis' *Persepolis* — and at the time, his music seemed to be coming from another planet." But Xenakis took a strange hold on the young Desplat. "Years later, while I was studying with Claude Ballif at the Paris Conservatoire, I took a summer initiation into Xenakis' sound machine, the UPIC."

A bit of background here: Xenakis, an architect and engineer as well as composer, built a computer system called UPIC — the *Unité Polyagogique Informatique du CEMAMu*; CEMAMu is in turn an acronym for Paris' Centre d'Etudes de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales, where he built the tool. UPIC translates images and graphs into sound.

Desplat says that such far-flung musical interests have shaped his work for the big screen. "Music for films allow a great deal of diversity," he explains, "and the more you widen your skills, the better you become."

Despite his own triumphs, Desplat entered the Harry Potter realm six movies into the series, after major movie composers had been attached to previous installments. Desplat's two most recent predecessors in the series are Patrick Doyle and Nicholas Hooper, but it was John Williams, who penned the scores for the first three titles, whose music has become an iconic part of Potter pandemonium.

"I started 'Deathly Hallows Part 1' from a fresh palette," says Desplat, "but keeping in mind John Williams's theme — 'Hedwig's Theme' — which has become *the* Harry Potter theme. When a theme is beautiful, it's a pleasure to rearrange it or to interweave it with your own music. But in 'Part 1,' I ended up barely using it — it is much more present in the last episode."

A film scorer's most pressing concern is creating a successful marriage of sight and sound. "I always seek a vibration between the music and the image," says Desplat. "It's an intimate relationship which makes the music a necessity, and not only an embellishment — a good balance between fiction and function."

Desplat says the link between color and sound vibration has always been strong for him. "I discovered Scriabin's *Prometheus* with my teacher Claude Ballif." (For *Prometheus*, [Alexander Scriabin](#) — a synesthete for whom certain sounds triggered certain colors in his mind — invented a instrument, the *clavier à lumières*. This "keyboard with lights" allowed the composer to demonstrate the spectrum of colors he associated with particular key signatures — and it was only used for *Prometheus*.)

"But this question of colors, of light, of shadow, has always been very present in the way I approach movie soundtracks," Desplat explains. "For example, I chose to write most of the music for 'The Tree of Life' in the key of C Major, because to me C sounds white and pure." And if Harry Potter's harrowing portal into adulthood had a color? "Hmm ... " Desplat ponders, "I'd say grey-bluish."