

Settling the Score

By Nathaniel Rogers | [0 Comments](#) | January 04, 2011 01:00PM EST

From his work in the latest Harry Potter to Polanski's The Ghost Writer, composer Alexandre Desplat is Hollywood's go-to maestro.

If you're a regular moviegoer, you're familiar with his work. Even if you only get to the movies on special occasions for an Oscar hopeful like [The King's Speech](#) or an event film like [the latest Harry Potter](#), you've heard it. [Alexandre Desplat](#), the gifted 49-year-old French film composer is in demand. He scored five movies this year alone, with just as many on the way in 2011. **Nathaniel Rogers** talks craft and character with the Frenchman behind the music.



I had first scheduled an interview with [Alexandre Desplat](#) a full year ago, when he received his third nearly consecutive Oscar nomination for the whimsical score for the animated film [Fantastic Mr. Fox](#). One year later, his voice finally materializes on the other line, just as French-accented and deeply intelligent as one would imagine it to be. It took a full year, but luckily there's always something worth interviewing him about.

"I never stop," he admits straightaway. "I can't stop. I'm like a fast moving train."



International film success rarely happens overnight, though it often seems to come hurtling at unexpected moviegoers in a flash. Desplat began composing for French theater and film in the eighties. Roughly five years ago, his career exploded internationally. After gorgeous efforts like [The Girl With a Pearl Earring](#) in 2003, his hypnotic score to [Birth](#) (2004), and the thrilling aggressive French sensation [The Beat That My Heart Skipped](#) (2005), a film with a distinctly musical bent—the lead character was both a thug and a concert-level pianist—Desplat, or rather his music, was suddenly everywhere. He's been averaging five to six movies a year ever since, composing everything from British period trifles ([Chéri](#)) to Asian espionage thrillers ([Lust Caution](#)) to American epics ([The Curious Case of Benjamin Button](#)).

Desplat is the first to admit that his career has been blessed: “To be able to say no is an incredible luxury,” he says, reflecting on the demands on his time, “but also saddening.”

He works round the clock but wants to work more!? What keeps him going?

“Passion. I read a story I like, or there’s a director I want to work with, and I just go. It comes before anything in my life. Music is my first passion, and combined with cinema, it’s just a nonstop obsession.”



The names of legendary auteurs pepper his conversation, his love for the movies as obvious as the passion for music.

“The stronger the point of a view of a director, the easier the music is to write. A strong point of view is what an artist is aiming for. Being near someone who has this vision gives you a solid path to follow.”

This train of thought leads directly to [Roman Polanski](#), with whom he worked on [The Ghost Writer](#). Unlike most directors, who use temp scores of previously existing music during editing, [The Ghost Writer](#) came to Desplat with no music track at all.

“He’s the kind of director who thinks that the editing gives the pace, gives the energy,” Desplat explains, admiring the director’s great sense of rhythm. “The way he stretches time, the way he accelerates, the way he twists. He has a cinematic language that’s so built on timing.”



Desplat also draws inspiration from performances, and loves writing for great actors, like the central duet featuring [Colin Firth](#) and [Geoffrey Rush](#) in [The King’s Speech](#). His score for that Oscar hopeful has already won him **Critics Choice** and **Golden Globe** nominations. Desplat considers actors, along with the basic narrative, the most important element of a film when he’s scoring.

“The music has to be very smartly crafted around them; you can’t overwhelm their performances. You have to respect them and play with their voices, with their rhythms. Where and how can the music play? At which moment of the dialogue should I come in or come out? What instrumentation can

support or embrace the voice of [Nicole Kidman \(Birth\)](#) or [Colin Firth \(The King's Speech\)](#)?
What texture can you bring around them without being in the way?"



So does he see himself as an additional voice, another actor if you will?

"That's exactly how I feel. I'm trying to be like [Zelig](#)—to sneak into the picture," he adds with excitement, wittily referencing the great [Woody Allen](#) film about a nondescript man who can transform his appearance to resemble those around him.

Though Desplat speaks with obvious pleasure about his work and the movies in general, his success is not without its difficulties. "People come to you because you do something well and they want you to repeat it. You have to be hard on yourself to get away from that artistic comfort zone."



So how does he recharge his creative batteries?

"Several things: listening to music by composers I like that I've lost track of. It could just be by running in the park. I read two or three books a month, and I watch movies. And I sleep."

"Sleeping is very good," he adds, punctuating his list of creative recharging techniques. This last note sounds entirely sensible and true. But he doesn't leave it at that. "Even five minutes of sleep is good," he adds, suddenly reminding you of that moving train, the one that can't be stopped.

Five minutes? "It's very efficient for me."