

Alexandre Desplat

'Lust, Caution' & 'The Golden Compass' composer

By **JON BURLINGAME**

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Earlier this year, French composer Alexandre Desplat was honored with a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination, for "The Painted Veil" and "The Queen," respectively (and won the L.A. Film Critics award for both).

He could repeat the feat with music for two vastly different films -- a haunting score for an NC-17 film set in wartime China and a grand-scale orchestral backdrop for a PG-13 family film based on a famous fantasy novel.

Director Ang Lee flew Desplat to Shanghai for the shooting of "Lust, Caution" to get a sense of the time and place and to talk about the film's musical needs. "Ang is very sensitive to music," the composer says. "He plays Chinese flute himself. We mentioned Hitchcock, spy movies, the 1940s."

But, Desplat also pointed out, re-creating the style of a '40s score "would have been useless, even comedic. We decided to go for a more restrained sound, and also be careful with romantic piano. And avoid any sexy Hollywood-cliche saxophone. This was not a game. We're talking about real people being killed. That's what we had to feel."

He ended up with a large string ensemble, plus piano, harp, vibes and the unusual choice of electric cello -- a sensual and more low-key substitute for the cliched sax. Lee himself played piano on one critical cue near the end of the score. "He did it in one take," the composer says with a laugh.

For "The Golden Compass," Desplat spent four months writing and recording two hours of music with a 120-piece orchestra and 60-voice choir in London's famous Abbey Road Studios.

"I had always dreamed of doing an epic movie," he says, "the opportunity of playing wide and deep, and having big lyrical themes. When I read the book, it was obvious that there was a lot for a composer to imagine -- the adventurous colors that you can create with an orchestra, but also an otherworldly feel, a sense of traveling. You can experiment in a more ethnic way."

Desplat wrote more than a dozen themes signifying characters and locales for the story of a young British heroine and her encounters with good and evil en route to a great adventure in the Arctic. The pressure of an expensive CGI-driven film was a new experience for a composer who began his career on small French films with tiny budgets.

"I've learned a lot, to adapt, to have a quick reaction to new cuts and changes in the way scenes were edited," he says. "It could be a very complex puzzle."

Desplat also co-wrote the score for this year's "Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium," creating the original themes and supervising the finished score by Aaron Zigman (who came in when post-production ran late and Desplat was already on "Golden Compass").



Desplat

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