

How Do You Create Music For a Film You Haven't Seen?

By Anthony Kaufman

Creating the music for "The Tree of Life," Terrence Malick's epic spiritual drama that recently won the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival, was a unique challenge for veteran composer Alexandre Desplat.

"It was perilous," said the four-time French-born Oscar nominated composer ("The King's Speech," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button") in Cannes last week, where Malick, the reclusive filmmaker, was a no-show at press events. "But it's good to be in danger," added Desplat. "You need to be in danger; otherwise, you get old." The film opened in the U.S. this weekend.

Desplat said the experience was particularly challenging because Malick asked him to create the music without ever seeing the film. Desplat saw the movie - with his score - for the first time in Cannes with everyone else.

"I never delivered pieces that weren't built on an arc or storyline, because the storyline is what guides me. So does the dialogue, the pace, the editing, that's where I put my grips. But I had no way of doing that here."

Instead, Desplat worked with Malick for years, talking about everything from poetry to Mozart, Arthur Rimbaud to French filmmaker Francois Truffaut. "He liked very much the music that Georges Delerue wrote for Truffaut's 'Jules and Jim,' because there's this river-like melancholic, but joyful spirit," said Desplat. "That was one of the references: Energy and melancholy. I think that's why he hired me, because I have that in my music a lot."

"[Malick] wanted something sensitive, delicate, and always with a sense of motion, a river-like feeling that would flow through the film," continued Desplat. "He likes the extremes, from the upper frequencies to the lower frequencies."

Desplat ultimately decided that the film's score should be in the key of C, "because C evokes two colors, white and blue, which seemed to me matching the film: Visions of sky and light and childhood and innocence and even death, in some cultures, white is the color of death. And then I brought in another key, D, which, to me, is a very strong key, to bring in more light."

Music aficionados might hear a tinge of minimalist influences in Desplat's score. But more than minimalist master and frequent film composer Philip Glass, Desplat cites John Adams and Steve Reich as inspirations. "I use the repetitive patterns as a tool, not as a dogma," he said.

While "The Tree of Life" also includes music from 19th century French composer Hector Berlioz and modern composer György Ligeti, whose music is famously heard in Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," Desplat said Malick was not interested in evoking the sci-fi classic, despite the fact that "Tree of Life" includes epic images from outer space. "I don't think [Malick] likes science fiction, as much as likes watching stars," explained Desplat. "He likes this infinite world of possibilities."

"Terrence didn't want big," Desplat clarified. "It was always about the serenity, the purity, the innocence more than anything. He never said he wanted a big orchestra. I remember when I was in Austin in his editing room I asked for a piano to be delivered, so I could try some things. Sometimes, it was just one note repeated that would suffice. He liked that the images would be big and the music would be very small."

