

## "Zero Dark Thirty" composer Alexandre Desplat on his "non-score" for the film

ZERO DARK THIRTY | DECEMBER 19, 2012 | BY: SHARON KNOLLE |



French composer Alexandre Desplat was just nominated for a Golden Globe for "Argo."

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You may not hear much of [Alexandre Desplat \(http://www.examiner.com/topic/alexandre-desplat\)](http://www.examiner.com/topic/alexandre-desplat)'s score in the tense docudrama "[Zero Dark Thirty \(http://www.examiner.com/topic/zero-dark-thirty\)](http://www.examiner.com/topic/zero-dark-thirty)" and that's what he and director [Kathryn Bigelow \(http://www.examiner.com/topic/kathryn-bigelow\)](http://www.examiner.com/topic/kathryn-bigelow) had in mind. As the French composer told me in a phone interview, Bigelow's only direction to him was, "It shouldn't be a score." The film, about the 10-year hunt to find and kill Osama bin Laden, is just one of five major movies that the busy Desplat scored this year. He was just nominated for a Golden Globe for a very different real-life political thriller, "[Argo \(http://www.examiner.com/topic/argo\)](http://www.examiner.com/topic/argo)," and also composed the music for the drama "Rust and Bone," the quirky romance "Moonrise Kingdom" and the animated children's film "Rise of the Guardians."

Desplat has worked with some of Hollywood's top directors, including Ang Lee, David Fincher, Wes Anderson and Terrence Malick. He's been nominated for four Academy Awards for his work on "The Queen," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "The King's Speech" and "The Fantastic Mr. Fox" and it's very likely that one of his 2012 film scores will land him another nomination and possibly even his first win.

### **You've been busy this year: How long does it take you to write a score, usually?**

It depends on the film and the type of score and the amount of music and the time that's actually offered to me. Sometimes it's a desperate situation where you have only a few weeks. So it depends. It goes from three weeks to three months all together, to write and record.

### **For "Zero Dark Thirty," it seems like there is less music than in an average film. There are so many moments where there's no music at all.**

Not really, I wrote an hour of music for this film, which is a lot. [The film is 2 hours and 37 minutes.] It's not playing in

the foreground, because it would be almost embarrassing if the music was showing off all the time. It has to have some highlights, moments where you can really feel the music surround you, but most of the time, it's trying to be with the character, with Jessica Chastain, and with the story. There is a lot of music and there is a big orchestra. The music does stay in the background, except for a few moments like near the end of the film, when Chastain's character has a moment to let the success of the raid sink in.

Yes, because then you can release the emotions. Before that, you have to keep being gripped by what's happening.

### **What was your emotional reaction to the film when you first saw it?**

I think I didn't get the script: I can't remember. I do remember that I was glued to my chair. I couldn't move. I was completely invaded by the film because it's so strong the way Kathryn has directed it. Unbelievable. It doesn't look like anything I've seen before. There's a lot of gravitas, but it never seems heavy. There's a level of darkness, but it never looks dark. There's a lot of political thought, but it never seems manipulative. You're always involved and yet her point of view is distant: She looks at these people like [she's] watching from the sky. It's incredible, there's such a complexity and a simplicity at the same time. It's mind-blowing. That's what I felt when I saw it. The two and a half hours just went like this. [Snaps his fingers.]

### **What kind of direction did give you?**

She didn't really know. The only phrase [she said] when we were working together was, "It shouldn't be a score." And that comes back to your first question, meaning that the music should never be manipulative or trying to push the audience to feel something that would be overwhelming you or playing the bravura, or playing the patriotism, or playing the sadness. It's never playing that. It's always playing the key part of the story and always taking you through this 10 years of the chase. The score shouldn't be underlining the action and underlying the emotions. We're never doing that. When there's emotion, it's always inside the heart of Jessica Chastain, because she's the one driving the story, she's the one driving us, she's the one we have empathy with.

### **Is it always your goal to be so subtle or was that particular to this film?**

This one has these singular qualities. I've never done a film like this one before. Never. And I don't think I've ever written music like this one before. It really belongs to this film. There was not a canvas. It's like a painting that suddenly comes to you and you realize that's the painting you wanted to paint but you couldn't do it before. Something wasn't there. There wasn't the right sense of color or right depth of field or structure. Suddenly, you see everything clearly, everything is there and it becomes one. All these elements that were part of the puzzle become just one object.

### **How was your approach to "Argo" different from "Zero Dark Thirty?"**

There's no chase in "Argo." There was one question: Will we be able to free these hostages? "Zero Dark Thirty" is about a wall between two parties and the goal of one of the parties is to kill the king of the other party. There's only one target, so it's very different. It's find the target and shoot. "Argo" is about finding people and bringing them out, bringing hope. The other one is not about hope, it's about death.

### **What did Ben Affleck want in the score for "Argo?"**

Ben structured the film going back and forth between Hollywood -- there's this great idea about creating a fake Hollywood movie -- and the real action in Iran. So for Ben and I, the goals were always tension, tension, tension, suspense. And always finding a new plateau. Will they make it? Can they leave Iran? Will they be able to make the Iranians believe they are a real film crew? It's all about believing that it's possible and that they will be successful.

### **What are your musical influences?**

There's so many. I've listened to everything that I've had access to since I was very, very young. There was a lot of music at home from Mozart to Duke Ellington to Greek music and movie music. And now, there's a day where I'm listening to The Doors, and a bit later in the day if I have a moment between my writing, I will listen to Bruckner or Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. A musician listens to everything he can. On my level, it's for pleasure, but it's also to improve and discover things that I might have missed in my previous listening or things that I've never heard or that I could learn from.

### **Do you have a favorite score that you've written? I'm very partial to "Lust, Caution."**

It's tricky, because I never go back to my scores. I've done a few concerts, very few, [performing] symphonic scores of mine. It's a bit of torture to go through the scores [again] because I feel that everything is useless and I should redo everything. So it's difficult, but here and there, I can tell there were moments in my evolution, some plateaus.

Definitely [the 2001 Belgian film] "Read My Lips," was one moment. "The Luzhin Defence" by Marleen Gorris, "Girl With a Pearl Earring," of course. "The Beat My Heart Skipped." "Benjamin Button." "The Queen." "Lust, Caution." And "The Ghost Writer" with Roman Polanski. There are these moments where I know there where I opened a new window, like "Ghost Writer," [where I said], "There's a way there that I've not yet been to."

It's not always easy to have a film that gives you that opportunity. To find a movie, to find a director with who you can exchange the desire of a new window, because [a lot of them] like the comfort zone of the music that you have already written. That's sometimes painful. You don't want to be at the window, looking outside. You want to go outside and find a new path. All those movies I mentioned were moments where I learned something new about myself.

### **What is the greatest reward you get from writing music?**

Reward? I don't know. I don't think that way. Writing music is something very tedious. It's horrible! [Laughs] And maybe the greatest moment is when I go to the podium in front of my fellow musicians and I start conducting the orchestra or the band or the combo or whoever is in the room and I start hearing and dealing with the sounds, the balance of the sounds and the musicians together. That's where I think I'm really happy. And then it's over and I go back to my room.

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#### **Sharon Knolle, LA Classic Movies Examiner**



Sharon Knolle learned everything she knows from the movies. She is a regular contributor to AOL Moviefone and has written for USA Today, Us Weekly, and Variety. A former Seattle-ite, she just celebrated 10 years in LA. Contact her at [sharon@sharonknolle.com](mailto:sharon@sharonknolle.com).