



Interview: Alexandre Desplat Discusses His Favorite Project, Not Refusing Daldry, and Working Alone

By [Allison Loring](#) on December 14, 2011



When I was given the opportunity to interview French composer **Alexandre Desplat**, the question wasn't *what* I would ask him, it was how *many* questions I would be able to get in. One of the busiest composers in the business, just this year alone Desplat has created the scores for *The Tree of Life*, *A Better Life*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*, *The Ides of March*, *Carnage*, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and is already on deck to compose next year's [Moonrise Kingdom](#).

Desplat first caught my attention a few years ago when I realized he was the composer behind both the quirky score for *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and the epic score for *Twilight Saga: New Moon* – two very different films with two very different musical tones. Having won Film Composer of the Year at the World Soundtrack Awards, it is clear that the rest of the world is starting to take notice as well.

As this year comes to a close, I spoke with Desplat about what inspires him, his composing process, the differences between working on American and French films, and how he balances his various projects while keeping his passion for composing fresh with each go around.

First and foremost, congratulations on winning Film Composer of the Year! How did you begin your career in film composing?

Movies and music have always been the great passions in my life, so it was a natural choice to go into film composing, and one that I made at an early age. I soon started writing short films, as many as I could, and this led to me building up a career in French cinema.

In looking back over your body of work, is there a particular score or project that most stands out to you?

Writing good music is always a challenge. An intimate score like the one I recorded with the **Traffic Quintet** for *L'Armée du crime* [*Army of Crime*] requires a lot of attention. Sitting by a legend like **Roman Polanski** and playing him your themes to picture can be rather...nerve wracking. Of course *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Parts 1 & 2* were challenging in terms of the amount and scale of the music that had to be written and the expectation of the most

famous global franchise, but it was also a great pleasure to meet this challenge. I cannot say that I have one favourite project – I give each project my all, so my favourite is the one I am currently working on! Or actually...the next to come.

You have worked on a variety of films from last year’s Academy Award Best Picture winner *The King’s Speech* to Terrence Malick’s artistic vision for *The Tree of Life* to the teen-centric *Twilight Saga: New Moon* – what draws you to a project and makes you want to take it on?

It is a combination of the subject, which has to resonate in me, the quality of the script, the anticipation of the relationship with a new director, the long-term relationship with a faithful director or producer. The cast can also be decisive – you don’t want to spend eighteen hours a day for several weeks watching an actor or an actress on screen who does not inspire you. All these many things together inspire me to take on a project.

Do you prefer a collaborative process when composing or to figure things out on your own before conferring with others on your vision?

I spend a lot of time working alone – I can be quite monk-like in this respect and try to go almost into a trance. So I prefer to be on my own when I write, although every score is of course a collaboration with the director.

What is the first thing you do when sitting down to begin composing a new project?

The first moment I see a movie, I don’t think melodies, I think colours. Before I find a structure and the way I would write a motif or character moments, I think about what the orchestra will play. What textures, what “sound” does this movie need? Then I start searching for ideas and themes and once I have found a strong skeleton or structure for the score I then build on it to flesh it out, adding and varying these colours, and developing the music. My favourite part of the process is conducting the orchestra and hearing the best musicians, like those of the LSO playing the score for the first time.

Do you prefer composing along with footage from the films or simply based on the idea of what is happening in a scene?

I am quite a visual composer. I write the majority of my music to picture. I spend some time absorbing the images and the narrative, then try to find my way of expressing not just what is on the screen, but often what isn’t there.

Is there a difference between composing for French films versus American films?

Yes, there is, because our cultures are different, our history of cinema is different.

[Luchino] Visconti or [François] Truffaut has a different point of view to [Howard] Hawks or [Martin] Scorsese.

The filmmakers are all different, but the composer has the same exchange with the director. It’s always: how can I improve the movie with music? What’s my duty here, what can I do to help? Working with American directors or French directors or English directors actually is the same. It’s an exchange between two creators who know the crafts of their own and meet to put these crafts together and make them merge. At the end, I’m working for the director, he’s the one I need to fulfill with my score. Otherwise, I would write for the concert hall.

You may be one of the hardest working composers in the business having composed the scores for no less than FIVE films this year alone – how do you jump from the emotional space of a father struggling to provide a better life for his son (*A Better Life*) to the finale of the beloved Harry Potter series (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1 & 2*) to a high stakes political thriller (*The Ides of March*)?

I dedicate myself to each project for a period of time. So I become immersed in the film and its emotions and can then write quite quickly. Once the score is complete, I then commit and invest myself fully in the next project.

You are composed the score for the upcoming *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* – how did you get involved with this film?

I have wanted to work with **Stephen Daldry** for a long time but our paths had not crossed until this project. He contacted me to ask if I could score his film and I could not refuse!