



Clockwise from top: Danny Elfman, A.R. Rahman, Howard Shore, Alexandre Desplat and Jan Kaczmarek (Photo by Dan Busta/DanBusta.com)

## Oscar Roundtable: The composers

Dec 15, 2008, 09:00 PM ET

*Film composers aren't exactly the most social creatures in Hollywood. But when five of this year's Oscar front-runners -- A.R. Rahman (Fox Searchlight's "Slumdog Millionaire"), Howard Shore (Miramax's "Doubt"), Danny Elfman (Focus Features' "Milk"), Alexandre Desplat (Paramount's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button") and Jan Kaczmarek (Overture's "The Visitor") -- sat down recently with The Hollywood Reporter's Kevin Cassidy, they seized the opportunity for a frank, passionate discussion of the past, present and future of film music.*

**The Hollywood Reporter:** Film is a collaborative art, but composers work in relative isolation. Is it strange to get together like this?

**Jan Kaczmarek:** We tend to socialize very little. Much less than writers or directors.

**Danny Elfman:** Any part of the industry really. In fact, directors and writers tend to seek each other out. God knows actors all seem to know each other. It is the weirdest field for sure.

**Howard Shore:** Let's change that.

**Alexandre Desplat:** We should set aside a week or so during the year and meet. Or at least try to ...

**Shore:** Like a retreat.

**Elfman:** Somewhere in the Himalayas.

**Desplat:** With a studio of course.

**THR:** If you had to name one score that has influenced your work the most, what would it be?

**A.R. Rahman:** (Vangelis') "Chariots of Fire," because it was all electronic and it was fascinating. I used to listen to orchestral scores, but this one was completely new. It interested me to get into synthesizers and explore the feeling and emotions (of electronic scores).

**Kaczmarek:** This needs a disclaimer: There are a number of great scores. But because I have to answer: "The Mission" by Ennio Morricone. If you ask why, I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm coming from a Catholic country and I prefer a certain amount of spiritual emotion or passion. I love ethnic elements and, for me, it was deeply moving -- and deeply moving is the ultimate compliment.

**Shore:** I would say Toru Takemitsu's work. Especially "Woman in the Dunes." His use of silence, I thought, was interesting. Takemitsu also did "Ran." He used music in an epic way. I think that I was interested in how other composers from different countries expressed their ideas in film.

**Elfman:** (1951's) "The Day the Earth Stood Still." Bernard Herrmann. Probably because of the age. A lot of the bigger influences have a lot to do with what age you were exposed to something. I must have been 12, and it was the first time that I became aware that there is a personality behind music. Until then, I just thought music rolled out of a machine. It was that movie that I noticed the music, and I noticed the name, and I realized that somebody did this. (After that) I started looking for Herrmann's name every time I would go to the movies.

**THR:** Do you ever listen to your past work and think, "I could have done that better"?

**Shore:** I try not to. It's too painful because, of course, you are always trying to rewrite music you've done. You are always trying to achieve something greater than what you've done. You're rarely ever satisfied.

**THR:** Rephrasing the question, do you ever think you really nailed it?

**Shore:** No. Never. I was at a screening of "Lord of the Rings: Return of the King," and I kept trying to rewrite it as I was watching it -- still trying to fix certain bars.

**Desplat:** I can't even play a CD of mine. I can't look back, because you remember how on that particular day you could have achieved something better, or how it was in the studio that day, or how the sound engineer wasn't there. I don't think a creator should look back -- not only for your work but for everything. Looking back captures your history, but you should continue to look forward.

**Rahman:** I go with what people like. It's very simple. Sometimes you work so hard on something, and they neglect it or end up ignoring it. When (a director) likes something, I ask, "Why did you like it?" But I feel the same (as Alexandre): I don't feel like listening to my stuff. I want to keep going forward.

**THR:** Can it help being on a schedule with such tight deadlines?

**Elfman:** I think this is critical when I talk to young composers. If you can not adapt to work under, sometimes, excruciating deadlines, then you really are not going to last in this industry -- because that is, most of the time, a reality. It's an exception if a movie has no particular time limit.

**Desplat:** Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I feel like I'm in a film noir, with my back up against the wall and there is a gun. But I have no gun.

**THR:** Do you respond well to that?

**Elfman:** I, for one, would never finish anything.

**Kaczmarek:** Constant revision would be the case without a deadline. So deadlines, in my case, are necessary as a motivating element. Somehow, we are all part of a natural selection since we function quite well at this.

**Shore:** I would be OK without the deadline. I like music and I could write music every day. I don't need a deadline. I enjoy the process.

**THR:** Does it ever feel like work?

**Shore:** Well ... no. It's part of you. At a certain point it feels like breathing. It's just a part of your life.

**THR:** What happens in a sequence when the story simply has to go from A to B? You could probably phone in that kind of music, and we've all seen movies where that happens. Is there ever a temptation to not give it your all on music that simply moves the action along?

**Rahman:** Sometimes -- but you love the film, so when you get into a film and you don't like parts of it, you have to think, "I love this," and score it beautifully.

**Desplat:** There is always a scene in a movie, when you look at the architecture of the movie, you think, "This will be hard" or, "This will be a piece of cake." You know where you will have your struggles. There are moments that will be technically more difficult and emotionally more difficult. You know you will have to spend more time on certain scenes.

**THR:** Fans of film music always appreciate it when the music is still interesting in those A-to-B type of sequences, and all of you are particularly good at that.

**Kaczmarek:** There is one modifying factor that we haven't mentioned: the collaboration with the director. Our own independent vision can be modified in both ways: It can make the process much nicer or easier, or it can be a painful one if you can not get to a common conclusion.

**Elfman:** Not to mention there is another part of the equation, and that's when sometimes you do the whole thing, and you think you've done pretty well, but then you find out the whole scene has been restructured and the music editor can't snip it up and make it work, and you have to approach it all over again.

**Rahman:** Yes -- it is a disaster. (Laughs.)

**Desplat:** Yes, because you always think that because there is a big amount of work, you have achieved as much as you could to perfection for that moment -- and then everything changes.

**Shore:** It's important to make films in a linear way. It's the most productive way to do them. You wouldn't start shooting a film if the script wasn't finished.

**Elfman:** It's a contemporary problem. Thirty, 40 years ago this wouldn't have happened. It's something we deal with now that our predecessors didn't have to. They didn't have to reconstruct things in the eleventh hour the way they do now.

**Shore:** It's a good discussion point, because here is a group of composers sitting here saying that the best way to make good films -- which is what we all want to do -- is to allow that the postproduction process be linear. It's like what Danny said: Films used to be made like that, and look at all the great films that were made.

**Rahman:** Another thing is temp music. (Directors) have temp music from CDs and they get used to it, and then they expect you to reproduce it. But when the music is different, then you have like four or five people saying, "No, it's not the same." I've come across that, and it's frustrating. I think it's good to work with a director from the beginning and talk about themes and get that in his head like the old days.

**THR:** Do all composers generally hate temp music?

**Desplat:** It depends on the director. If the director is loose, it's fine.

**Shore:** It's restrictive to the creative process. It's already focusing on a certain type of thing so you cannot go beyond. Certain directors will never use temp music. Scorsese will never use it. He doesn't understand why there would be music from another movie in his movie: "How can I watch my movie with music from this other movie in it?" How can you, in a genre film, ever achieve something better in the genre if you are just using genre music? It doesn't make sense.

**Desplat:** There is a great wisdom in that. Unfortunately, not widely accepted.

**Shore:** Yes, but here is a great forum to discuss these things. Yes we don't get together much, but some of these things are important to discuss in order to achieve something better in film than might be currently happening. These are some of the problems affecting the creative process. It's worth discussing. We should put it out there and say, "These things are important to us."

**Rahman:** It is a problem. The moment you hear temp music with the visual, it is limiting. I always ask them to give me a cut without the temp music, and then I finish the score and ask to hear the temp music just to see what they wanted. So that way my initial instinct is (unaffected), and then I compare the two.

**Elfman:** As you do lots of films you start to develop instincts. One of the things that I tried to develop is that when I see a film for the first time with a director and they're playing temp, I try to get a sense of, "Do they love this?" And if they really do, that's a signal for me to go in another direction, because you can sometimes tell when somebody is really in love with that (temp music), and if they are my radar will always be up for that.

**THR:** Do you like where film music is at now in its evolution?

**Kaczmarek:** Well there is this great era of composers that we always site, like Herrmann and (Erich) Korngold. But as much as I like bold strokes and the great scope of that era, it is, in a sense, useless today because we can't write that way. As much as I admire that craft, we are living in different times. There is a much more subtle language being used now.

**Rahman:** I am so much in love with scores that have great melodies, but nowadays if you have a great melody they say, "Oh, it's distracting from my film."

**Shore:** Film music is changing all the time. From year to year, the styles are changing, and frankly, they are all of interest. I find it an interesting, fascinating process seeing this art form evolve over a hundred years. I think this year is the 100th anniversary of film music. If you look at the history of it, and where we are in it, it's such a young art form steeped in music tradition. It started with classical music and then opera and then evolved into the great scores of the '30s, the experimentation of the '50s and '60s. It has just been an interesting process. Film music is a fascinating art form and there is still great work to be done. We have the benefit of all these great works of the past to build on, and there is a future ahead.

**Desplat:** The field is so wide open in front of us. That's why I like to create music for movies, because you can try anything.

**Shore:** Everything is possible. It's why I was interested in it in the beginning. I feel exactly the same (as then); I have the same energy about it, the same sense of searching for new ways to do things or new means of expression. That's why I mentioned the Takemitsu score -- that was very new at the time. I like the idea of freshness and newness with a visual art like film. Film's way of telling stories and using music in different ways is really fascinating, like the great group of composers here uses music in different ways. It's still a growing, vital art.

**THR:** At this point in your careers, what are your aspirations?

**Kaczmarek:** It's always a desire to touch the impossible, without naming it. This can be a movie or it can be a piece of work unrelated to film. But I'm still hungry for some experience, which I believe is ahead of me. It's like what Alexandre said, that we should look forward. No matter how satisfied or happy I was with my last piece I still desire the unknown.

**Elfman:** I don't think I've come anywhere close to anything that has made me happy. I'm still looking for my "Lawrence of Arabia." I want my "Godfather." I want my "Citizen Kane." That's always like a carrot hanging in front of me -- the one I've been trying to reach for 24 years now. Even when I think I have a chance for it, in the end, I think, "No, this wasn't it." That's why I keep going. I'm optimistic, but I'm also pessimistic towards trends. It seems now it's more difficult to do things of meaning than in the past. I'm a big fan of the music from the '30s, '40s, '50s, and I know that growing up listening to those scores, you can hear every note of what it was doing. It was so clear listening to Bernard Herrmann's work. In a big film, I think of young composers coming up, and I think they're not going to learn anything listening to my composing for this film because they will be very hard pressed to find what kind of detail was happening at any particular moment. I believe sound effects have become more important than music in Hollywood and in big films. The music has become secondary. So that's something that I've been fighting against for the sake of the art of the big score.

**Desplat:** I think we all hope that there will always be directors who would like us to write music in real terms and be ready to explore and be open to the composer. This goes back to the temp track thing. But I'm optimistic.

**THR:** It does seem that these days the music can easily get lost because the sound effects are so loud.

**Elfman:** There's a trend for films in general to be louder and louder each summer. I noticed this for the last 10, 12 years. There is a point where it can't go any louder.

**Kaczmarek:** It also depends on the type of film. Some films require huge electric energy. But it's very good to discuss. I believe it is in a critical situation. On the other hand, we cannot start complaining all the time because this is also unwise. Of course it's critical because of what you all said and what Danny said: There is less space for our creative contribution. There are some directors who are very sensitive to music and who understand music, who know that music can create a miracle. But there is a second part to this: the studios.

**Desplat:** I think the director is crucial. Sometimes he can have power over the studios.

**Kaczmarek:** Sometimes, but it's very rare. I worked one time with this director who had final cut, and even then it wasn't that great because the studio said, "Yes, you can have your final cut, but we will only open you in five theaters instead of 2,000."

**THR:** How are shrinking budgets affecting film music?

**Elfman:** The best music is often done on the lower budgets. Look at the dozen best scores of the year. Very often -- not always, but often -- they are the little films that tend to come out at the end of the year where the music is allowed to shine.

**Shore:** I tend to disagree with that, I must say. I think the quality of recordings is being affected by the budgets. There are budgets that are required to achieve a certain quality in the studio. We shouldn't be trying to do things with less and less money.

**Elfman:** We both just finished relatively low budget movies.

**Shore:** Yes, but the music budgets should bear a relationship to the overall cost of the film -- and that's not quite happening. I don't like to see that. I'd like to see the budgets maintain a certain percentage of the overall cost.

**Kaczmarek:** I think it's very dangerous. I think it's romantic to think things can happen with no money, but if there is no money in our profession, we cannot afford the best orchestras. If we don't hire orchestras, they have no income, they lose their instruments. In my country, the film business deteriorated to a miserable level. Under Communism, Polish filmmaking was stronger. Even with censorship, it was much better because there was money in the system so people could make good movies.

**Desplat:** I think the debate is more about different types of cinema. We are talking more about art movies. That's what they are called here. In France, they are just called movies. (Laughter.) We don't have big studio movies. So I think, yes, when you do an art movie, everyone has the same kind of energy. They're all trying to create something different, something that explores, something that takes chances. There's more freedom. If you don't need a big orchestra and only need a few players, you can have that and make a very good score.

**Shore:** To make good films you need a good balance between all parts -- the cinematography, the production design, the postproduction, the preproduction. Music has to maintain a quality of the overall design of the film. I see that shrinking. I don't like the fact that it's shrinking. It should maintain a level that it had maybe five to 10 years ago. To make good films, there should be a balance. Music shouldn't get short shrift.

**THR:** What is the least enjoyable part of the composing process?

**Rahman:** Deadlines and pressure. That happens every time.

**Desplat:** It's when I can't find what I am looking for, day or night. One day goes by. Then it's a week. Then it's 10 days. When the ideas aren't coming, I sleep.

**Kaczmarek:** I go for a walk. An intense one. Speed-walking helps.

**Elfman:** Like Alexandre, needing to find something that I feel like I haven't found, feeling the ticking of the clock. Trying to be relaxed enough to not panic, because if you panic, you will never find what you are looking for.

**Shore:** I asked an illustrator how he creates so much, and he said, "Just keep the pencil moving." Just toil. Keep the pencil moving. It's so simple. As long as your pencil is moving, you are working. If it's moving, you feel a sense of accomplishment. Even if it's not very good, you feel it's moving.

**Elfman:** Do you ever feel like you are working on an equation?

**Shore:** It's a cumulative process, writing music. "The Lord of the Rings" scores took almost four years to write, but it felt like 40 years because it took a lot of time for me to learn how to write that much music in that time frame, to be able to do it and orchestrate it. It's a cumulative effect that allows you to write and open up under pressure, under deadlines. It's just the experience and the cumulative energy of doing it all those years.

**Elfman:** What do you do when you put that bucket down the well and you don't hear the water?

**Shore:** You keep the pencil moving.