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Alexandre Desplat adroitly finds the proper musical key

The Oscar-nominated composer has scored eight films in 2011, including 'Extremely Loud,' 'Tree of Life,' 'Harry Potter' and 'A Better Life.'



Alexandre Desplat, top center, during a scoring session for the "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close" soundtrack. (Adriana Lopetrone / January 5, 2012)

By Randy Lewis, Los Angeles Times

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One crucial facet of Stephen Daldry's film "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close" emerges with a mysterious key accidentally discovered by a young boy whose father perished in the collapse of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

The boy, Oskar, becomes obsessed with finding the lock the key will open, a theme that French composer Alexandre Desplat strongly connected with in crafting the music for Daldry's film.

"Most of the time, I'm looking from the director's point of view," said Desplat, who wrote the scores for no fewer than eight films released in 2011, including the finale of the "Harry Potter" franchise, Terrence Malick's "Tree of Life" and George Clooney's latest, "The Ides of March." "The point of view of the director in this particular film is the point of view of this child: this freshness he has, and his innocence.

"Everything goes through his eyes and through his emotions, his hidden emotions," Desplat, 50, said from his home in Paris, during a short holiday break between the seemingly endless stream of film music commissions he's been balancing since his career breakthrough in 2003 with his score to "Girl

With a Pearl Earring." He's landed four Oscar nominations in the last five years, the latest coming for his music used in "The King's Speech."

"I always feel that when I write music I need to understand the point of view of the director. Once you've found that, you can find the key to the music," he said. "In a way I'm in the same position as this child: always trying to find the key. The point of view here is this very quiet child who can confidently put together anything after what his family went through; he's trying to find a way to rebuild himself, the way the rest of the world has tried to do after Sept. 11, the way your nation has tried to do."

Approaching ideas and emotions as massive as those touched on in "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close," Desplat said, requires a delicate balance.

"My tendency is that less is more; that's always been my philosophy in music," he said. "It doesn't mean the orchestra cannot get big, or go huge or lush. It's a question of when and how. If it's big and loud all the time, it doesn't work; it doesn't fit with Stephen's aesthetic. But if it goes wide and lush at the right moment, when you've been properly prepared, when you take the time to make it grand and lush, then it can work."

Work is what Desplat's been doing virtually nonstop in recent years, a career situation that has only one drawback.

"It's hard to say no," he said of offers he's had to pass on. "I'm now at a place I dreamed to be when I was a teenager — to be offered wonderful movies by the best directors in the world. It is difficult to say no, but I have been in worse places than that. I can't really complain."

Among the most emotionally resonant projects he's taken on was doing the music for both parts of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," because he was charged with completing a franchise that was started by one of his heroes, John Williams.

"You just start to work on this kind of film with a lot of humility and with a great desire of being proud of what you will write," he said, "while hoping the masters you followed will be looking at you, without looking down on you."

One of the biggest challenges he's faced lately was Malick's insistence that he write music without seeing any of the film footage.

"I was a music provider," he said. "My job was to find some kind of glue for the rest of the interesting [primarily classical] music he had always planned to use. That's what I'm doing there: trying to build a bridge, without knowing what's on each side of the bridge. Like invisible pillars. I can easily imagine that coming out of Terrence's imagination: a bridge without pillars, this floating structure. He's a floating spirit... floating over the world and watching it from above, trying to not to be prone to the attraction of the earth."

Desplat's score for "A Better Life" is set to director Chris Weitz's film about illegal immigration in Los Angeles.

Weaving elements of Mexican and other Latin American music strains into his score for "A Better Life," he tapped his classical music education and childhood experiences growing up in France. He recalled accompanying his older sister to choir rehearsals where the Mexican conductor exposed his students to a broad range of Latin and Hispanic music. That experience contributed strongly to Desplat's passion for a panoply of world music sounds and styles.

"At the end of the day, all these traditional styles of music are linked," he said. "Whether it's two women singing in a field in Africa, or two Peruvian Indians dancing and murmuring, there's something that's always connected. When you hear a worker in a field in Morocco, or a shepherd on the mountain, if you go to Naples and hear a guy singing while he's fixing a roof, or go to Majorca, it's the same song."

And that, perhaps not surprisingly, manifested itself in some of the music that permeated the enchanted world of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"On the Harry Potter films, there's the voice of his mother reminiscing, a voice that comes and haunts Harry in his dreams and throughout the film," Desplat said. "We tried to find a voice with that innocence and that purity, and I was listening to this Japanese singer, Mai Fujisawa. I played it for the director and he said, 'Yes, that's it.' So you see, once again, it is the bridge with no pillars."

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