

By Rudy Koppl From musical flights of fantasy to a maze of clever themes throughout the magic of **The Golden Compass**, composer Alexandre Desplat has opened up new musical doors to his style. Through brilliant sonic depictions of vast arctic landscapes, the epic battle of behemoths, as two polar bears fight to the death, and a multitude of characters from other worlds, this is the first epic fantasy extravaganza Desplat has penned in his career. It's been more than twenty years as Alexandre remembers, "I had a dream when I was a kid to one day score a big fantasy adventure movie in Hollywood like Star Wars or Alien, films with large epic scores that I admire by Williams, Goldsmith, Jarre, like in Lawrence from Arabia, and Bernard Herrmann's Jason and the Argonauts, The Day the Earth Stood Still, and Fahrenheit 451. I knew this would be a huge amount of work because it's a trilogy. You have to imagine the complete story so my music can match it from beginning to end. The characters are changing a lot through the story in the three books, so that's the challenge."

Scoring his dream come true was no easy feat for Desplat. From the very onslaught of the film scoring process, it was the construction of a vision in transit. Director Chris Weitz was completely consumed by the amount of special effects that were totally necessary to make this adult fairy tale come true, so his task for the composer was overwhelming, "We tortured him by changing around the cut multiple times, even up until the last possible days; we kept the visual side of the cut open. So unfortunately for him, he had to make slight adjustments with his orchestration and the length of his cues." Although the edit kept changing up to the very last moment, Alexandre's collaboration with Weitz was a labor of love as he explains, "It was really easy to work with Chris, he really trusted me. We finished mixing the music two weeks before the premiere, so it was tight. During the last weeks, I'd conduct in the morning, rehearse the orchestra, and fix things, while in the afternoon another conductor would take over to record the stems and the orchestral layers, while I would go back to my studio and write the changes and then come back in the late afternoon to check the percussion sessions. Then at night I'd work a bit more in my studio, sleep awhile, at 4am wake up and work until 9am, then go back to the scoring stage and start all over again. Chris was never on my back to change things; it was excellent, a great collaboration!"

Desplat had come to L.A. to promote **Lust, Caution** and **The Golden Compass**. I hadn't seen him since I interviewed him on the Eastwood scoring stage at Warner Brothers when he was recording **Firewall** two years ago, and it's always a pleasure to grace the Frenchman's presence. His schedule was tight; it was back to back appointments and at least two screenings with interviews. On Wednesday afternoon I traveled to The Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills to meet with him in the Windows Lounge. We talked over a Bloody Mary and a cup of green tea, you guess who drank what, but just as we started I was reminded of something that Chris Weitz said to me the day before, the perfect explanation of Alexandre's dream, "Film music has a direct channel to your emotions even more than story does. When you're seeing a movie you're exposing a number of your sense organs to this experience, you are sitting there in the dark and the music goes straight into your heart!"

#### **What were your impressions of director Chris Weitz?**

He's a strong, very dedicated, cultural person. He was raised in England and America, he speaks French, and it was a great way of communication because of his cultural diversity. His artistic challenge was extremely important and was strong. Art director Dennis Gassner, costume designer Ruth Myers, visual effects supervisor Michael Fink, sound designer Glen Freemantle, and me, all these people are experienced, but very creative, so Chris surrounds himself with a very intelligent crew.

#### **Tell me about your thematic work, how did you approach all the different characters and dramatic scenarios this film has to offer?**

Every character is ambiguous, no one is black or white, good or bad, so it's more complex. As the trilogy progresses the characters change a lot, so my themes had to have the capacity of being twisted in one way or another, being very positive or darker. Chris and I decided that we wanted to have a Peter and the Wolf lead into the movie, like motifs coming back and forth, but the tricky thing is that in many places the main characters are with other characters. I had to slowly build up many themes, thirteen all together, and for a trilogy that's not so much. The themes are based on Lyra, Lyra and Roger, Lyra taking chances or her courage, Iorek, Ragnar, Lee Scoresby the cowboy, you don't hear Lee's theme in this film, but it's ready for the next one, the Gyptians at war, the thought of the Gyptians, when anyone talks about them with these little clarinets, Billy Costa, the kids, the Gobblers, and Mrs. Coulter, which is also connected to The Magisterium, and the Main Theme (The Golden Compass), which is this motif that I added on top of these two chords, G Minor and A Major, that's where I have the melody.

#### **How did you develop The Golden Compass Theme throughout the film?**

The theme is extremely layered. There's this motif that producer Toby Emmerich was really keen to have; it was a motif that could really talk to every one. Each time we heard it we would recognize the compass. It had to be haunting and spiritual, so I used Tibetan bowls, gongs, vibraphone, song bell, violin harmonics, electric cello; the quality of the sound itself is very complex. Later on it becomes The Traveling Theme, it actually has the same chords of The Compass Theme, so here and there I put two themes together to create a third one.

**Chris said, "We approached the arctic landscapes like the desert in Lawrence of Arabia."**

Maurice Jarre was always haunting me because he's the French master of these epics and I'm French too. He was the man in the sixties and the person I looked up to as a Frenchman. With Lawrence of Arabia he created a sense of immensity, energy, quietness, and the war, all of these elements would appear and disappear, so that was the magic of his work. He created amazing melodies and textures for the sense of the desert, which are all these things at the same time. It's dangerous, it's quiet, but the edit can be very loud because of the war, the wind, or the sand tempests or storms. In this film we have a snow desert, and it's still just a desert because it's a vast landscape with sub-zero temperatures, the arctic pole has very few animals and humans there.

**Tell me about your music for Ragnar Sturlusson, when we enter The Palace of the Bears?**

When we enter you hear six pianos ringing. Its six pianos playing exactly the same thing in the big room at Abbey Road One, just ringing, it sounds amazing because you think you're hearing a bass or electronics, but it's just six pianos. It gives you a sense of strangeness, immensity, another worldly place. This is an idea I developed with Chris earlier, we decided that for The Palace of the Bears we would only use metal instruments. The piano is like metal percussion because it uses metal strings. At the beginning I'm only using the muted brass to set up the bass part. They deliver a very metallic sound that's not very loud, so I wanted it to be weird, spatial, and electronic.

**Was Ice Bear Combat one of the most intense compositions for you?**

Yes, it was. The challenge was to make as emotional as I could, as big as I could because there's a huge amount of sound design because of the bear's armor. I needed it to be musical and not just noisy. By using the strings a lot to do waves, movements, arpeggios, and scales, this created a sense of movement, acceleration, and even sometimes the sense of a dance. The brass and percussion performed these hits to give the battle energy, while the strings were the magic. When Ragnar dies you hear all the very low brass, tympani, and Gran cassa, all playing this very low tone.

**Another example of your string writing can be found in Iorek Byrnison.**

I've always loved to do that, to have the strings do quick things instead of keeping them doing the melodies. I like to have the strings do the rhythm, which is not so frequent. When the orchestra performs a cue like this I try to save them as much as I can because it's very difficult. There's one cue I wrote for the spy-flies where they had to play pizzicato, which is very fast and strong, we had to do it again and again, so I saved it just until the right moment and then said, 'Now you can play that. Go!'

**You used a variety of voices in the score, what did this involve?**

I wanted my choir to be specifically a male choir, which means bases, baritones, tenors, countertenors, and boys. The idea was to have no women, so you're not hearing a female chorus; you're hearing men singing in a higher register. I wanted it to be different; I didn't want it sound like mermaids singing. When Iorek and Lyra see the witches in the sky you hear these boys singing, it's not women, its little boys. So I used the choir to support the orchestra and sometimes for a blend of color.

**What ethnic instrumentation did you use?**

Aside from the orchestra I used mandolin, a Greek bouzouki called the baglama, Tibetan bowls, the gongs, an electric cello everywhere, in fact the first note you hear on the CD is an electric cello performing a harmonic glissando and that blends with a tuvan throat singer. The singer can perform more than one pitch at the same time. Tuva is a region in South Africa. Tuvan throat singers can perform a duophonic sound; they can sing a low drone and on top of that sing harmonics. Here the electric cello is doing the same with a chorus pedal. I love to blend sounds together so you can't really tell what instrument it is. I also used a cimbalom, if you pay attention during the Gyptians cue; it's there, saxophones, flutes, recorders, chance flute that I've played, there's also a Mongolian cello, which is very beautiful.

**What do you love about film music?**

It's my passion. I have three passions, music, movies, and women, well, when I was young. When I was between seventeen and twenty five those were the major things I had in life. So when I write a score and there's a beautiful actress, I'm mesmerized when I score to Naomi Watts, when I score to Nicole Kidman, Ok, they're Australians, but I also like to score to non-Australian actresses (laughter). My love for film music has been forever, since I started to realize that there was this great music in this Chinese film Naked Island, Spartacus, The Misfits, all the Hitchcock movies, Barry's James Bond scores, or the French with Michel Legrand, all these movies that have amazing music that stands alone. My taste in music is very wide, from jazz to world music including orchestral symphonic scores, so it made sense to be a composer. I could create, be inventive, and have two of my passions together, movies and music; it's as simple as that. It's the passion that keeps me going.