

# Scott Holleran: Freelance Writer

## Alexandre Desplat on *The King's Speech*

by Scott Holleran    January, 27 2011

Composer Alexandre Desplat recently spoke with me from Paris about his new score for *The King's Speech*. He has scored some of Hollywood's best motion pictures, including *Casanova*, *The Upside of Anger*, *The Queen*, *The Painted Veil*, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. We talked about them all during our interview.

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*Scott Holleran (SH): Do your motion picture scores express how you feel about the movie—or how you want the viewer to feel about the movie?*

Alexandre Desplat (AD): I guess it is a combination of both. I come with a certain heritage and emotions and desires when I see a film and I apply it to the music. My job is also to serve what the movie is calling for—a lot of music, a little music, big or small—and the dramatic arc [of the story] must be emphasized.

*SH: Did the fact that *The King's Speech* is about making something important for people to hear make you more attuned to the material?*

AD: Yes, it's actually one of the main elements, the fact that this man [Bertie, played by Colin Firth] lives in silence. He can't [easily] express himself or his feelings and I had to take that into consideration for all the elements—the melodies, etc.—to be integrated.

*SH: Did you choose Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (II) for the crucial first encounter between Bertie, the royal prince, and Lionel, the speech instructor?*

AD: I did not—it was [director Tom Hooper's] editor who found this idea of solemnity. At the time, Beethoven was a sonic figure for the French resistance and there was also the irony of using a German composer. When I first heard it, I was asked to replace it, and I said 'are you joking?' It is completely in sync with the scene.

*SH: Do you know if that piece was actually used by the king?*

AD: That I don't know. What we know is that [Lionel] Logue [portrayed in the movie by Geoffrey Rush] was using a lot of classical material—[Joseph] Haydn, Beethoven—as part of his imaginarium.

*SH: You wrote that you were immediately impressed by the masterful direction of *The King's Speech*. Why?*

AD: The film itself stands for two hours with no faults. It manages to have all these elements crystallized—which is very difficult. I was impressed by how incredibly crafted this is; how [director] Tom [Hooper] challenged the placement of the camera, the use of the frame, everything is very thoughtful. The frame is used as vocabulary and, in cinema, the frame is the vocabulary of the art—cinema is used to tell a story. Even the use of camera lenses work into the commodity. They are not just there by accident; they are from the [distinctive] point of view of the director, who wants you to feel what the characters are feeling, being overwhelmed by the rest of the world. All of this is very thoughtful. You forget the technical aspects and the movie goes beyond that. You never think: 'there's a crane in that shot'. You get completely immersed.

*SH: The film is humorous but it builds to a serious conclusion about rising to resist dictatorship—and, I wonder, since your mother is Greek and your father is French; did your parents live under Nazi occupation?*

AD: Yes. My father was in the French resistance [against the National Socialists] and he fought in the Fifth Army with [United States Army General George] Patton. The Nazi invaders were in Greece, too.

*SH: So, this is personal?*

AD: Yes. It is very personal.

*SH: Which is your favorite track?*

AD: I never listen [after I have finished composing] because I hate it, but in thinking back, I like the opening scene, when I give the sense of wit and a gentle, childlike mood and I like the scene when [Bertie] manages to speak out about his childhood, which is very subtle and gentle and opens him up more deeply. The wall is pulled back.

The King's Speech: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack *SH: Director Tom Hooper said your score is beautiful in its own right, with its own integrity and voice independent of the film. Are you pleased with the result?*

AD: I am pleased with what we've achieved with this film. I think we found the right tone, emotion and subtlety—and razor's edge wit, like at the rehearsal [scene] at Westminster Abbey, which follows the dramatic arc. Tom has a great sense of the arc.

*SH: Had the musicians of the London Symphony Orchestra seen the film before their performance?*

AD: No, but I always try to have a screen or two in the studio, so the musicians are not playing blind.

*SH: Why did you seek what you call a "je ne sais quoi" romanticism for this film; what about The King's Speech strikes you as romantic?*

AD: [Pauses] It is a very romantic story because this man was not [necessarily] meant to be a king yet he has the strength to go over his ability and to drive an empire. So, there's something epic about that. And the way Tom shows that by [depicting] the intimacy of the man, his family and his therapist. These are epic moments. He is going to help his country to resist [the Nazis] and be strong.

*SH: You scored another recent Best Picture contender, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, which is subtle yet lush and romantic. Some did not respond to the film and score, deeming it too abstract. Do you see why one might say that?*

AD: [Chuckles] No. Movie soundtracks have to evolve. I think they can be very heavy-handed and obvious. The audience has grown up more than people think.

*SH: You have said that a picture's score should have a function and evoke a fiction. Which is more important?*

AD: It should be 50/50. While I have an ideal of the music, I try to have the right balance.

*SH: What is your favorite scene in The Curious Case of Benjamin Button—when Benjamin takes his father to see the sunset?*

AD: That's a beautiful one. [Pauses] As we speak, I think about my father because he died last week.

*SH: I am sorry to hear that—*

AD: —No, no, it's OK. I am glad you brought it up because that's a favorite scene. You gave me a beautiful image of it. Thank you.

*SH: What is the dominant emotion for the main theme to one of your earlier motion picture scores, The Upside of Anger?*

AD: I wanted to keep the wit and lightness at the surface, but feel that deeper element, which is darker and sadder, and let one feel that it's not just a comedy. Also, it's not only about two lovers—it's about a woman raising four girls, a mother who is trying to help these girls become adults.

*SH: For The Queen, you've said that director Stephen Frears wanted you to create something original, without an agenda. Did you enjoy that process?*

AD: [Laughs] It's the same with [director] Roman Polanski [with whom Desplat worked for *The Ghost Writer*]. They are both incredible directors—both very meticulous—and they both want to bring their own identity [to a score]. As long as you are showing that, the freedom is great, so long as the director trusts you and you have a sense of the frame in which you have to express yourself.

*SH: How did you become involved in composing two cues for Casanova, directed by Lasse Hallstrom, who says that your music blends seamlessly with the masters?*

AD: I love Lasse Hallstrom and his films. I've followed his work through the years. What happened is that Lasse worked with a music director [on that movie] and used a lot of classical pieces that were unbeatable. There's a point where you can't

replace what's there and the music can't always connect to the story. In *Casanova*, the score is classical, and there was already so much. We had no room. I would love to work with him again, but I would want to have a [complete] score to create.

*SH: For The Painted Veil, you also played piano, flute, percussion, keyboards on the soundtrack. Why?*

AD: Because I like sometimes to take my flute, which is in a box, and take it out of the box—because I miss the mouthpiece and this instrument I've been playing since I was nine until I was 25. So, once in awhile I like to play. When I see other musicians going ballistic like on *Harry Potter*, I get excited and I want to play—it's a kind of joy.

*SH: You've said that creating a score is like piecing together a complex and delicate puzzle. When you see a film you've scored, does the puzzle come together so you consume the whole picture and score on its merits?*

AD: What I try to do is go back to the first scene and forget all the technical issues—even the joy [of making the score] and the separate moments of recording and writing—and [just] enjoy the film and share it with the people around me. I try to forget whether it's too loud or not loud enough. When a movie really moves you, you can watch it again and again.