

His Lovely Film Score Mixes Wonder With Realism

By JIM FUSILLI

Los Angeles

For the David Fincher film "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," which opens tomorrow, composer Alexandre Desplat faced the challenge of scoring a fable free of all irony and cynicism, one whose hook — a man ages backward, growing younger from birth — is quickly accepted by its characters and the audience. Mr. Desplat's orchestral score is full of sweetness and a sense of wonder, with a realistic underpinning that's at times somber but never disheartening.



Ken Fallin

"To have such a humanistic project is so rare," Mr. Desplat, who is 47, told me when we met early this month in the Laurel Canyon music studio of his friend Marc Shaiman. In the film, he said, "there's never mockery or manipulation. I thought, 'Maybe I can make it more moving, but never manipulate.' It really is a beautiful fable. But after a few minutes, you forget it's a fable — you follow the characters."

The film tracks Benjamin Button's unorthodox life from the moment of birth. "It's not easy to tell the story of a whole man and still create sympathy," said Mr. Desplat. "But he is positive. He's never hurting anyone. He keeps his gentle soul."

It's also a love story in which Benjamin, played by Brad Pitt, and Cate Blanchett's Daisy have only a brief time during which they are about the same age. Mr. Desplat's tender themes for the main characters, which float on tones within wispy scales, reinforce Mr. Fincher and screenwriter Eric Roth's conceit that relationships are temporary and precious.

For all the film's special effects, Benjamin's tale is told in a matter-of-fact style, which required discreet, romantic music that retains its humanity even when it muscles up for action sequences. "It takes a lot of technique to achieve something simple," Mr. Desplat said with a smile. The composer, who received an Oscar nomination for his score for the 2006 film "The Queen" — and whose superior score to "The Painted Veil" won that year's Golden Globe award — said he was interested from the moment Mr. Fincher approached him. The film "speaks about death, love, sorrow and age. How can't you be interested in that?"

Its New Orleans setting also appealed to this Frenchman, who was influenced deeply by American music. Hints of jazz are buried deep in the score. "My father listened to jazz, so New Orleans music was part of my education," he recalled. "He listened to Armstrong, and I played trumpet at age 7. It's a land that I knew."

Still, he said, "I didn't see how the syncopation of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong could work. The blues would've been a little bit too on the nose."

He recalled the work of his predecessors who used jazz motifs and employed jazz sounds and phrasing in subtle ways. "Franz Waxman, Alex North, Bernard Herrmann, and then Michel Legrand and Nino Rota," he mentioned first, before noting that he admired Henry Mancini and John Williams, too. The piece "A New Life," he said, has "a muted trumpet that reminds me of the late-'20s and '30s period of Duke Ellington." A saxophone played by L.A. session legend Dan Higgins appears in the score, as does "a trombone with a mute, like Tommy Dorsey," Mr. Desplat said. The main love theme is conveyed by alto sax, alto flute and viola, and the tick-tock of time passing is embodied by an electric guitar.

"Daisy's theme ['Meeting Daisy'] is the most Ellingtonesque," he said. "She's a dancer. It's assertive. Benjamin's theme is childlike – gentle and bouncing like a little boy would." The theme he wrote for Benjamin can be played forward and backward and still retain its harmonic integrity, he said.

In time, Benjamin's and Daisy's themes come together. He demonstrated how as he moved to Mr. Shaiman's piano and played a conjoined theme in D major 7 that he modulated effortlessly to C major 7. The music was as gentle and hopeful as a kiss, but with sober overtones. And it had the same level of intimacy as it does in the film.

Some film scores can lose their magic when heard without their accompanying movies. But that doesn't occur when you hear Mr. Desplat's "Button" score, which is available as part of a two-CD package on the Concord label. (One disc is his music, the other incidental period jazz and pop pieces that appear in the film.) The sheer loveliness of the music is a primary reason, of course. But there are others: For one, Mr. Desplat wrote complete compositions for the film, not mere snippets that fit the sequence to the second; every one of his 23 pieces, which range from 90 seconds or so to more than four minutes, has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Mr. Desplat recorded performances of the entire orchestra playing at the same time, which he said is becoming a less-common practice in Hollywood. "Everything here is live. Musicians want to feel the emotion of the music. They want to be surrounded by sound."

In the days following our conversation, Mr. Desplat was nominated for a Golden Globe for his "Button" work. It's the first step in recognizing properly a score that belongs among the Hollywood classics.

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