



Exclusive Interview: Waxing NEW MOON with Oscar-nominated composer Alexandre Desplat

November 19, 7:00 AM • [Soundtracks Examiner](#) • Mark Morton

It's not every day that you get an opportunity to speak with an Academy Award nominee, let alone one who recently was the recipient of two World Soundtrack Awards. But for all his accolades, French film music composer Alexandre Desplat is a true artist, devoted wholly to his craft. If he is publicly acknowledged for his work, so be it. He accepts it humbly, and keeps his head buried in whatever project he undertakes.

With the release of [The Twilight Saga: New Moon](#), however, Desplat may find himself unintentionally metamorphosing from workhorse to rock star. Having delivered a score that ignites imagination and passion from its listeners, surely many more honors are in the cards.

He completed seven scores this year ([Chéri](#), [Coco avant Chanel](#), [Un prophète](#), [L'armée du crime](#), [Julie & Julia](#), [The Fantastic Mr. Fox](#), and the aforementioned [New Moon](#)) and he's already got three in production for 2010...so far. How can someone possibly concentrate on such a work load when he is consistently offered awards?



It is here where our conversation begins...

It's funny; I thought I would get better at it when I go up on stage to grab whatever award it is. But as I look out into the audience, I see people like Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, Robert DeNiro, and Charlize Theron, I get so impressed and I ask myself, "What am I doing here???" I'm very humbled by it and very happy at the same time.

Do they affect you as a creative energy and the projects you take on?

The main thing there is to be inspired by film. That's what drives me; that's what I like; that's my life. The rest is just an accident. You get an award or you don't get an award, who cares? But if you make a great film, it's fantastic, and it's the best thing you could do if you find a great relationship with a director. Of course, the great thing about awards is that your name becomes more exposed. But I think the body of work that's behind you is most important. Because if I did bad work and provided bad music for movies, I'm not sure I would get another call.

Have you ever been confused or concerned about receiving accolades for certain projects, when there might be another project you feel stronger about and SHOULD be recognized?

Honestly, it's really out of my hands. Each project I commit my entirety to. I spend my life doing it, with long hours every day and night. So I don't really see any difference, whether it be a movie with an hour and a half of music, like **New Moon**, or a French movie like **L'armée du crime**, where there is only 40 minutes of music with an orchestra. To me, both have the same level of difficulty and challenge.

One of the truly remarkable traits of your soundtracks is that when listening to it, the audience participant easily loses himself/herself within the atmosphere you created. And I think that is due to your seemingly innate ability to find the "voice" of the movie. What is your process for becoming so connected to your projects? Do you receive a copy of the movie that you watch over and over until the pattern emerges?



Yes, that's exactly it. I have copies of each movie. I write movie soundtracks because I want to write movie soundtracks. It is no accident or a business that I wanted to have. I could be selling soap if I wanted a business. I do it because I am fascinated by the process of creating music for films. I never wanted to be a concert composer, either. When I watch a movie, I have a strange intuitive chemistry that drives me along. So it is great to actually have the

movie to watch again and again. Sometimes I find the right path right away, but even if I do, I choose not to get excited about it and explore other pathways. I circle around the movie for a long time, so I can be sure that what I am throwing at the picture definitely belongs with it.

It's funny; sometimes when I am offered a movie to score, I receive a copy with my music from previous scores on the temp track. And the directors say, "Oh, it works so well!" But I don't see it at all; it definitely doesn't work at all. It's the wrong pitch, the wrong color. It's a new body of work I have to invent; it's a new challenge. It's not just the melodies; it's the sound, the texture...it's like a new fabric I have to design.

Which leads me to ask; many times you will have multiple films being released in the same year, so how do you give each film its proper attention, so there is no crossover in sound design? Most composers who take on mass quantities of begin to sound similar or unintentionally repeat stylistic elements. How do you avoid that trap?

Well, there are two keys to that. Key #1 is not to do the same type of movie over and over. If I was to do only love stories or dramas or just thrillers, I would be doing the same music, because I would be in a niche. And there is only so much you can do in a niche. If you look at my body of work for any given year, you will see that there are no two types of movies that are the same in that year. And the second one is to just use your brain three times more than you did before – push every cell in your brain during the day and during the night to find ideas and working with an obsessed passion.

So, how did come to get the New Moon score project? Was this something you actively sought out, or did it fall into your lap?

I was actually very lucky to know Chris Weitz, with whom I worked on **The Golden Compass**. He called me and offered the film, and I said, "**Sure Chris, I would love to work with you again.**" It was a great experience working with Chris. He loves music, speaks French, and we have a nice relationship.



Did you listen to Carter Burwell's score for the first Twilight film when you accepted New Moon?

No, not only did I not listen to it, but I didn't even watch the movie. I didn't want to be influenced by it. Carter is a great composer and I loved his scores for the Coen Brothers. And I knew that if I went there, I would be in danger, because I knew that I would enjoy it and then be influenced by it. So I just passed and avoided it altogether.

Wow, that's very rare for a movie score to completely deviate from its predecessor in such a way. Usually movies that become franchise series' employ recurrent motifs throughout each film to carry that thread of familiarity, regardless of how many different composers might be involved.

Well, there were no requests from the Production Company or Chris to reuse any of the themes. I would have done it with pleasure, because again, Carter is a composer I really respect. And since I didn't have to, I didn't.

Carter's score was a brooding, coming-of-age, romance kind of score. But yours took on a much grander role, creating this forbidden romance sound fused with homage to classic vampire and horror films from the past.

Chris and I are both cinephiles, and we like **The Bride of Frankenstein** and Polanski's movies. I love Coppola's **Dracula**; it's a masterpiece in all aspects – visually and the score, which is fabulous. Our primary decision was about the longing love story, and the epic that these characters go through. Maurice Jarre was the only reference Chris and I used for this film. And I actually dedicated the score to Maurice.



I loved that even the tenderest moments in the score have a sense of danger and uneasiness, like each turn plunges you deeper into the unknown. Even the track "Marry Me, Bella" has a great sense of apprehension to it.

Yes, definitely. There are many moments in the film where you have to feel unsettled emotions. She has to choose between two men and doesn't know how to make the choice. I actually used that element to blur the two love themes – the one for Edward and the one for Jacob. But they are of the same vein, so as you are watching and listening, are you hearing Edward's or Jacob's? I love to put these subliminal tricks into the score just for the fun of it.

How did you come to decide to use an Asian element to represent the tribal aesthetic?

Well, as you know, Native Americans descended from Asia, so it only made sense to me. I used Japanese taiko as a wide Asian element – strong and organic, because it's wood.

Another track that instantly jumped out at me was “Wolves v. Vampire,” because it was a wild ride of a cut. It had a very Old Hollywood, Max Steiner bombast mixed with big boldness of John Williams. It really reminded me of King Kong vs. Jurassic Park.

Nice! I can live with that. I'll just keep that as a compliment. What can I say? You just named the best composers of that kind. From Waxman to Williams going through Goldsmith and Herrmann – they are all the masters of the craft, and I hope to one day follow their path. If you hear those things in the score, it means that I did learn well and shows my passion for movie soundtracks as well as these composers who I admire so much.



I met John Williams once at the Golden Globes when he won for **Memoirs of a Geisha**. I had a nomination myself **[for *Syriana*]**, and I was embarrassed to be there. How could I be nominated at the same time as John Williams? I went to introduce myself very humbly to him, and I felt like a child – I could barely speak. So you really just paid me a great compliment.

My pleasure; I really was blown away by your work on this score. Now, on the New Moon soundtrack, you submitted a song called “The Meadow.” Was that actually a demo track for what would become the New Moon score?

No, not at all. It's actually the original version of the love theme that I wrote for the film. It's the love theme in its most basic, simplified state. The score was actually recorded about a month later. And I just thought the solo piano would be the best option to match with the other songs that were on the soundtrack. I think an orchestral piece at the end would have been a bit strange or inappropriate. I wanted the music to have a real sense of movement and emotion.



Obviously, you had to be aware of how massive the fan base is for the Twilight saga, with the films, books, and chart-topping soundtracks. Did that add any pressure to you when writing the score?

There was absolutely no pressure at all. I was working with a good friend, Chris Weitz, who was very protective and enthusiastic of the work. And I simply took it as another film project. I didn't think for one second that this was a huge deal. I'd actually made that mistake before, thinking that what I was doing was going to turn into something massive, and it really derails your train of thought and puts too much pressure on you. I think I've grown up a little bit.

I was only asking, because Twilight's fan base is so strong, it pretty much single-handedly caused Carter's score for the first film to actually chart in the Billboard Top 100. And it is so rare for a score to even chart, let alone sell so many copies.

Yes, it is very rare. And I really hope that my score and Carter's will help to bring more of this kind of instrumental music to the audience, because radio is way too song-focused. There was a time (when I was not around) when radio was not only about songs; they played instrumental pieces, be they classical or jazz. And I think this is a great chance we have to bring music full circle again.