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## Score of *Katwe*

Alex Heffes on his music for Disney's *Queen of Katwe*.

By Chris Hadley

Tackling such projects as the Oscar-winning documentaries *One Day in September* and *Inside Job*, the Hulu limited series *11.22.63*, plus big screen fare like *State of Play*, *Escape Plan* and *The Program* (the story of disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong), composer Alex Heffes has dealt with a diverse range of genres and subject matter. At the same time, he's also become synonymous for his work on feature films and miniseries that capture various historical aspects of the African experience: *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), *The First Grader* (2010), the 2013 Nelson Mandela biopic *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (for which the composer received a Golden Globe nomination), and History's recent remake of the 1977 Alex Haley miniseries *Roots*.

Heffes' latest project, the new Disney drama *Queen of Katwe*, complements those past works with an aural experience that, like the film itself, runs the emotional gamut through a mix of classic orchestration, haunting vocals and traditional African percussion. Directed by Mira Nair (*The Namesake*), *Queen of Katwe* is based on the true story of chess champion Phiona Mutesi (played by newcomer Madina Nalwanga). Phiona, her mother Harriet (Lupita Nyong'o), her older sister Night (Taryn "Kay" Kyaze) and younger brother Brian (Martin Kabanza) struggle to make ends meet amid the squalor and poverty of Katwe, a poor town in Uganda's capital city of Kampala. Phiona's life takes a dramatic turn when she and Brian meet youth chess coach Robert Katende (David Oyelowo). Guiding her through the finer points of the game, Robert leads Phiona to become one of the most skilled chess players in the world. Over time, Phiona's success gives her family the opportunity to live a better life—but at the risk of leaving behind their familiar surroundings.

While Heffes' scores for *The Last King of Scotland*, *Roots* and *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* exuded significant dramatic tension, his music for *Queen of Katwe* is filled with wonder, anticipation and joy. "[Nair] emphasized that she wanted to have fun with the music," Heffes says. "She wanted a sense of play and energy with the children to come out. We knew that we never wanted the music to get too heavy handed." Having long admired Nair's previous films, Heffes jumped at the chance to work with the director. As it turned out, their collaboration during the scoring process proved successful. "Mira's great fun and she's a great artist, which is a terrific combination for me. She has the brilliant combination of having a vision, but also giving me freedom to do my own thing."

The opportunity to return to a place that he knew well—in this case, Uganda, which he had previously visited while preparing his music for *The Last King of Scotland*—gave Heffes an even greater incentive to join *Queen of Katwe*. "I went out to record some music before I did the score [for *The Last King of Scotland*]. I made friends there and I've been back there subsequently. I really love Uganda, the country and the people. That, plus Mira, made it a really exciting project."

For *Queen of Katwe*, Heffes was faced with the challenges of creating themes

that would chart the dramatic journeys of its primary characters while blending his original score material with several original African pop songs. With Nair's guidance and encouragement, he would work toward building a bridge between those two parts of the soundtrack. "The first thing I did was write a theme for Phiona, which I played to Mira on the piano and she loved it. Then, I started fleshing it out from there," remembers Heffes. "The score also had to mesh with all of the African source music—the Ugandan songs in the film. [Some of the instrumentation](#) was meant to try and blend in with that. More than just trying to be authentic, it was really about trying to have a sense of lightness and fun where it was needed and to not get too heavy."

With the aforementioned songs already part of *Queen of Katwe*'s soundtrack, Heffes focused on the task of putting his own imprint on the film's story, characters and scenes. "I just wanted to write something that was melodic, fun and playful, and it didn't have to be too African because that aspect of the real Ugandan music was covered," he adds. "In a sense, I was treating it much less like an African film and just trying to make it universally enjoyed by audiences wherever."

Thanks to modern technology, the recording sessions for *Queen of Katwe* were truly an international affair for Heffes and Nair. "I was writing in L.A. and Mira was in New York," he says. "We recorded orchestra in London; we recorded some of those African percussion instruments, thumb pianos and frame drums in Kampala. Then, we also added a layer with some Indian musicians, which were recorded in Mumbai." The talent and experience of the several Ugandan musicians playing on the score further enhanced Heffes' efforts during his work on the film's chess sequences. "They were wonderful flautists and percussionists that Mira's worked with for many years, and she really wanted to introduce them to me, so they added some little layers of fun into the chess games."

Heffes approached the drama of *Queen of Katwe*'s chess scenes—both big and small—with the knowledge that the game-related guesswork involved was already taken care of by Nair, editor Barry Alexander Brown, director of photography Sean Bobbitt and the real life Robert Katende, who served as the film's chess consultant. "The main games that you see in the film are actually based on real games that were played by Phiona at the time," Heffes says. "[Nair and I] had a very clear game plan of what the peaks and troughs were and where the cliffhangers were, if you like, in the chess games. I was treating it a bit like a ballet." For Heffes, the carefully structured cinematography of those chess sequences guided the scoring those scenes. "It's fantastic camera work where you see the pieces," he explains. "They're really big and up close, or they go into slow motion. It's sort of got that balletic movement when I was seeing it on the screen, as well, so I wanted to make [the music] very [fluid and light](#)."

For one of the film's most emotional scenes, which takes place during a major tournament in Russia, Heffes, Nair and the film's post-production team struggled to find the best way to punctuate Phiona's reaction to a painful defeat. They didn't have to go very far to find the right person to accomplish that task. Nair and Heffes worked with the film's star Nalwanga, a talented singer and dancer, to add her vocal talents to this critical part of the score. "We didn't really direct her. Mira asked her to sing something with the words 'mama,' just because it's a mother daughter story. She recorded a couple of phrases, and when I heard it, one of them just caught my ear," he says. "It's got a real emotion to it. I didn't really know where it was going to go. It was not done with any purpose in mind."

It was clear to Nair that Nalwanga's voice and Heffes' music could make a

significant difference in the sequence's dramatic impact. "When I was watching it without music, it felt like it needed an emotional boost. It needed something just to open up. I wrote this thing and I put the vocal on top, and I played it to Mira," he recalls. "She was like, 'Wow, I hadn't even thought about music there.' It was one of the places where she was really startled by something she hadn't expected, and she loved it so it stayed." The cue, "[Olympiad](#)," combines Nalwanga's impassioned vocals with Heffes' heart-pounding illustration of Phiona's loss. All told, it was an incredible stroke of good fortune for both director and composer alike. "Those things don't happen very often, but when it does, it just adds another layer of authenticity to it," he says. "Even though it's still a film score, there's something special about having our actor sing the lead vocal. I'm always on the lookout for trying to get some good luck."

Composing for *Queen of Katwe*, as well as witnessing how the film portrays chess itself, has given Heffes a greater appreciation for the game—one where every move can go a long way towards determining the outcome. "This is the first time where I've really seen chess on screen and it plays like a sport and like a drama, and draws you in. I really don't know the first thing about it, so that's total kudos to the filmmakers. I'm hoping to start playing it with my young daughter, too."

Heffes' music can also be heard in an upcoming episode of the acclaimed BBC anthology drama *Black Mirror*, plus a BBC Films nature documentary set to premiere in 2017 as part of its *Earth* series. As for *Queen of Katwe*, he hopes that those who view it will come away feeling both entertained and inspired by the story of a girl whose talent for chess paved the way for her family to finally achieve a kind of life that was once out of reach. "I just hope people go and see it, because it genuinely is a lovely film, and it's very powerful, and yet it's not heavy. It's an enjoyable family film that's got a really positive message," he says. "It's something I'm proud to take my family to see, so I'd be delighted if families can go and see it and enjoy. That's entertainment, in my view. I love that. That's my hope, and I hope they enjoy the music and the soundtrack."

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