

Interview...Film Composer Alex Heffes on 'Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom'

2013/12/23 BY [MARC CIAFARDINI](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



The world lost Nelson Mandela in December of this year and so it's bittersweet that this Winter we are given a powerful film that chronicles the life of such an important man. The film **Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom** is directed by Justin Chadwick, stars Idris Elba and Naomie Harris and features a moving and emotional score from award-winning British composer **Alex Heffes**.

Alex composed over 90 minutes of original music for the film. Traveling to South Africa he recorded choir vocals and South African singing legend **Caiphus Semenya**'s own voice to depict Mandela's passing into Manhood as a young boy and ultimately reprising this theme for his inauguration as South Africa's first black president. He recorded the vocal and percussion elements in South Africa the later scored the film with a 65-piece orchestra at Abbey Road in London.

Musically, he wanted to complement Idris Elba's performance. His goal in scoring this film is for the audience to come away having truly felt something – to feel the love of family, to try to convey despair and loss – the darkness and emotional emptiness when home seems lost and ultimately to feel uplifted. Working on this project has been a personal labor of love for Heffes and GoSeeTalk got to sit with Alex to discuss his role in this impacting film.

- It's been quite a year for you, having scored three films in 2013 and now your work on *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* has earned you a Golden Globe nomination. Congratulations.

*Thank you, it's been quite a productive year, and a very good one. Love and Honor, *Escape Plan* and *Mandela* were very different projects but I enjoyed them. Sometimes*

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it's easy to be pigeon-holed, and maybe that helps you because people get where you're coming from, you tick a particular box as it were, but in the long term having some variety keeps you a bit more interesting and I like that.

- This is an incredible story that's complimented by your sensational score. I'd like to talk a little bit about the genesis of the project. How and when you were approached by Justin Chadwick? This is your second time working together is that right?

Yes, it's my second feature with Justin but I've also done a television project with him and a project for the London Olympics last year as well. But as far as the Mandela



film, Justin discussed this with me very early on while he was researching the film in South Africa. He spent about a year compiling information before he started shooting, as you can imagine it's such a huge project to take on. So I had talked to him about it but didn't get around to discussing it further until about a year ago, sometime last Autumn.

I started doing a lot of reading and a lot of listening to South African music as my research, but work really started when I flew to London to watch the rough cut of the film and that first cut was incredibly strong and powerful even in a rough stage. As soon as I

saw it I knew it was something very special and knew it was going to be an extraordinary thing to be a part of.

I think just the fact, apart from the filming, that it has been made with the help and inclusion of the Mandela family and foundation and a lot of the key people in the film it gives the film the status of being an incredible document in itself and that makes it an historic and very exciting thing to be a part of. So it's been an unusual project, especially with the film coming out at this time when Nelson Mandela has left us is another extraordinary part of this whole jigsaw. To be honest I never foresaw it happening like this, but it just brought everything that much more into focus and made it even more extraordinary for me in many ways.

- I imagine it's very bittersweet that the film tells the story of this very powerful man, one that honors him and his life, yet he passed away before it was shared with the world. But making the movie with his family's involvement must have kept him up to speed on everything, right?

Yes you're right because the producer had this thing in development for many, many years. He actually received the rights to the story from Nelson Mandela while Mandela was still in prison. So it was something that Nelson was in touch with before he even knew he would be released from prison let alone become president of the country. It's been an incredibly long journey for the producer but they developed such a close relationship. So over the years, as the film had developed in different ways, Nelson Mandela was kept abreast of casting issues, the script, and all the rest of it.



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*By the time we made the film Nelson Mandela was quite infirm but he certainly saw parts of it and enough of it to see Idris Elba. Apparently at one point Nelson asked if that was him on screen because Idris seemed to embody Nelson so well in one of those long shots. *laughs* So he had seen parts of it and his family had been very involved. I met with his daughter Zindzi a few weeks ago and it was pretty incredible to be able to talk to her about the film, what it meant to her and what it was like to see her life play out in front of her.*

It's an extraordinary experience, and of course working on something like this brings an added layer of responsibility because you're dealing with real people and real life, so it's something you must think really carefully about when you start working on it.

- With this being such a big film and a huge endeavor I guess it helps that you talked to Justin about this even before he started filming. But did you still have some apprehensions about this, like "wow, how did I get here and what am I going to do"?

**laughs* Yeah and I do on every movie. It's not until after the movie is done that you sit back, watch it and then you get an idea of the scale of something. It's strange like that. It's very daunting starting every film, especially this movie with it being quite a big story that spans a lot of time and I knew there was a lot of music that I was going to have to write. There's probably an hour and a half of score. So that's daunting in itself but had I known that things would have transpired as they had with the world spotlight being on Nelson Mandela in the way it is now that would have been a lot more intimidating. But this is why we are not gifted with being able to see the future *laughs* and in some ways that's helpful.*



When you work on a film, and in my case doing music for it, you sort of go into your own little bubble. You're trying to get it to work in the world out there yes but really you just try to get it to work in that little zone between you, the director, and the producers. I concentrate as much as possible on making it right for myself, and not trying to think of the audience or second guess what people are going to think of it. You have to know what you think of it first and get that as clear in your mind as possible otherwise I think you'll just be chasing your tail trying to guess what the world is going to make of it.

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- I heard that you learned a lot about African music working with Justin on his film *The First Grader* and utilized a lot of that regional style in developing this score. But can you talk about the ideas you two had going into this project, specifically what you call the “progression of musical styles” as it relates to the different time periods in Mandela’s life?

*The story of **Long Walk to Freedom** is set in half a century of history and it starts off with Nelson Mandela as a boy moving through the 1940s and 1950s as he grows up and becomes a young man. Then it moves through the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s*



during his incarceration then to the 90’s and his eventual inauguration as president. So it seemed to me it was important to try and create that sense of historic movement and sweep in the music.

The front of the film is a lot more simple, it has a tribal African spirit and as the music progresses and Nelson gets older we introduce an orchestra to focus on the love story between him and his wife Winnie. Then as it progressed you got more simplified or better downplayed sounds while he was in prison, and then in the 80’s and 90’s you get more of the guitars and drums to make it feel like the palate has been modernized.

But it’s gradual and your ears start to pick up on and adjust to these things as time passes over the course of the film so that when you come up to the 1990s and the ’94 election you somehow feel like you’ve been on a musical journey. Even if they can’t put their finger on what’s been given to them that’s the subliminal agenda I had writing the score.

- That makes a lot of sense. You create something indigenous and period specific, both in your music and the film’s source music, to bring some familiarity to the story that audiences might not be able to identify with otherwise.

Yes, and it feels like something that needs to grow. It starts off simply and expands thematically from there. I often find that you need to musically structure the score if the film is complicated so that you can guide the audience through it. Restricting the musical palette in the beginning and expanding it throughout the film lets us emphasize elements of the story based on plot points and periods in Mandela’s life. His later years were almost exclusively done with electronic and synth elements because it helps it feel like time is much closer to present day.

- You end with some very powerful and modern sounding music before the end credits song kicks in which was by U2 right? They have a sound that transcends decades and feels very of their era but also timeless. Did you work with them on that track?

*They wrote a fantastic song called **Ordinary Love** for the end credits. There’s some score just before that which is totally separate from the U2 song. I actually wrote that before U2 came into the film and it’s interesting how well that song and the score have blended together even though they were developed independently.*

- Well that final bit of score you wrote, before the credits, was an extrapolation or reprise of

the first track in the score “Sons of Xhosa” right? It creates a very fitting and moving bookend to the film. In the beginning we see Nelson becoming a man through the rituals of his tribe, and the music from that scene comes back at the end which is very well done.

Oh great, I'm glad you think so. It really felt important to musically bookend the film in that way to make it feel like you've arrived somewhere significant – that getting to the end of his long and incredible journey, and back to the beginning in a way, really did mean something. That connection there is exactly what we were going for.

- I think one of the most powerful elements to the score are the strings – the cellos really enhance the emotion and gravity of sequences and then at the end, like you said, you have the electric guitars which really give it the score an ethereal feeling. Can you talk about the mindset in playing up scenes with music verses leaving it out completely, you know that age old “do we put music in or do we leave it out” debate?

*Yeah it really is an ongoing debate *laughs* and that's where spotting the movie [to find out where music needs to go in the story] is such an important part of the job of the composer. *laughs* Although it doesn't always mean the composer has the final say in the placement. It's such a collaborative process sometimes and people feel that a scene might need music and I might say no I don't think it needs it but in this case I worked very closely with Justin and the producers to make sure we felt we have music in the correct places.*



I think the natural part of the process is to write a little more overlapping music then review it and then drop bits here and there to leave some air for the film too breathe, certainly in the prison sequences, in the middle of the film, during Mandela's incarceration there is less music and it's a lot more sparse to give the feeling of isolation

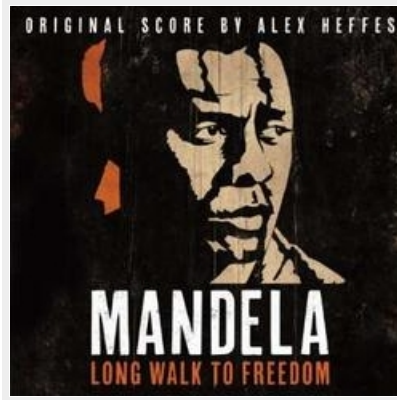
and timelessness. I suppose it helps convey the idea of being stuck in this time warp as Mandela realized he might never get out of prison.

Sometimes when you don't have music and then you do have a little spot of it here or there you get a lot from it. As the film moves into its final third, after he's released from prison, the film takes a bit of a turn, almost like a thriller. You would have thought after being released from prison after 27 years you'd be at the end of the film, but there's this extraordinary twist where not only is he released but then the country almost implodes and then at the same time Mandela is thrust into becoming president of his own country.

Although it happened over the series of a few years there's an extraordinary acceleration of events which Justin wanted to get into the film and he wanted music to help with that pace and make it feel like those events were just crashing into each other in this unstoppable motor that brought Nelson Mandela to finally become president. So that's where the electric guitars and percussion come in to give the sense

of driving forward.

One of the tasks of the score was to try and combine all of these elements, the strings, the guitars, the African elements that I recorded in South Africa and try and combine them in a way that doesn't feel like a mishmash and makes sense as a whole.



- Well its funny you mentioned thriller because I definitely got that feel as the movie began to reach the end. The track titled "The Release" has a lot of power to it but then there's that one scene where Nelson is giving this televised plea for peace and it just keeps building and building. A lot of times you think when a character is making a similarly frank but emotional statement it's better to downplay the score or just have it void of music, but you really added emotional energy to the scene and heightened its impact.

That's a very interesting scene, you could play it without music, but what was described to me by Justin and quite a few South African people who remember watching that particular address on TV was that up until that point it was not clear particularly what was going to happen in the country and Nelson Mandela was not universally seen as a universally acclaimed leader.



At the point that he made that impromptu speech imploring the country to put down their weapons, to use forgiveness, and move forward without violence, it was such a key moment in South African history because it wasn't planned. It was something that just happened. It turned the whole fate of that country's history around after that day and anyone who watched that address just sat up and said "that's the man that

who is going to lead us forward" and so Justin wanted to call attention to it.

And that scene was actually never in the script and it was put in quite late on so it becomes a very key scene. In history it's something that is generally remembered as being one of those edge of your seat moments where people were suddenly watching the TV and going, my goodness, this guy could be the one to get us through this. So it felt important to try and give you that edge of your seat feeling as this was unfolding in front of you and that's what music can do, provide the feeling of something you're watching with that sense of build and draws you into the story.

- Well you achieved what you set out to do and more. That was just amazing. I can tell from your answers and the passion in your voice how much this movie meant to you, so what would you say is the most satisfying thing about this project? Is it getting to work on a film of this size or scope? Is working with world renowned musicians, or singers like Caiphus-Semenya? Or something deeper?

There are many things to be proud of certainly, like going to Africa and working with Caiphus and the amazing musicians there, I'm also proud of integrating that with the

strings at Abbey Road in a way to make it all work as a whole but I think I'm just proud to be involved with the project in this extraordinary time.



It's proved to be an historic production to be a part of but I guess if you want a simple answer I am proud to be able to say to my family and say to my daughter "I was part of that". The film is an amazing story and I think it's going to live on for a long time and so I'm happy to be able to say to my family that I was able to help in my own way and I'm very proud of that.

- You wrote 90 minutes of music which is a lot for any movie but Justin Chadwick tells Nelson's extraordinary life story in 2 hours and 20 minutes. It's a lot to take in.

It is and that's exactly what I love about the film. There are so few stories that have this sweep and it's true which is just incredible. There are so few lives that have been led so fully and in so many different ways. You just can't believe that one person went through all of this and I think it's incredibly strong to take all that in in a cinema because it is so dense. You could tell this story in so many ways, like a mini-series, but there's something so focused about being sat in a dark theater where you can't get up, or make a coffee or answer the phone and you just have to follow that story on its sweep which I find so powerful. Being able to take it in in one shot is sort of a unique way of trying to appreciate the scope of that life.

- That's brilliantly said Alex *laughs* I don't want to ask another question. I think I'll let you go out on that one. Well, again congratulations on your Golden Globe nomination. But to end this can you talk about what you were doing when you got the news of the nomination?

*Well I was very thrilled and excited to hear the news. *laughs* Honestly I was a little knocked for six at first and I wasn't quite sure what to say as it came hot on the heels of a pretty intense weekend. We were attending a royal premier of the film here in London and Nelson Mandela's two daughters were present and we all discovered during the screening that he had died. It was shocking as were the whirlwind two days that followed. When the Golden Globes nomination came in I was still trying to take it all in and still am now actually. It was just incredible. I don't know what else to say save that I am just so proud to be part of this project.*



Thanks very much to **Alex Heffes** for his time. His score to the powerful film is [available now](#) and *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* opens on **December 25th, 2013**.

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