


NOKIA E71
200 mins, unlimited texts, unlimited internet and email plus free calls forever with Skype.

E20 A MONTH
TELL ME MORE




Join us on facebook



Interview



by Dan Goldwasser
Published: 02/28/2007
 Printable Version

When he's not scoring European and British films, composer Alex Heffes is working with Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker Kevin Macdonald, who has been branching out into feature films. Their latest collaboration, *The Last King of Scotland*, has received a lot of critical acclaim, especially for lead actor Forest Whitaker, who recently won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. SoundtrackNet spoke with Heffes about his collaboration with Macdonald, as well as other projects.

How did you meet Kevin Macdonald? First film you worked on together was *One Day in September*...

I knew of him, and his brother Andrew. Andrew is a producer, and he'd produced a film, *Shallow Grave*, and I knew some of the people involved in that picture. I think Kevin happened to hear some music I had just done for something, and it was a chance meeting - he heard something, we met up, we clicked, and they needed something very quickly for *One Day in September*, and it just worked out - it's nothing more complicated than that! Sometimes you work very hard on meeting people and making connections, and sometimes they just come naturally. It's been a pleasure, and I've worked with him a lot since - he's a very good director and a very clever guy. What caught me, when I first saw the rough cut of *One Day in September* is, even though it's a documentary film, it tells a story, and the story keeps you gripped all the way to the end, and so in that sense, it's a drama. And all of the documentaries he's done are like dramas. **[Play "Police Move In" from *One Day in September* MP3]**

Had you done many documentary scores before?

No, I'd done plenty of television, and had done a few documentaries, but mainly had been dramas, and I think that's what he was looking for in a composer - someone who would treat it like a feature, not like your standard documentary music, which is more in the background. He said what we were trying to do is tell the story as if it's a feature film - we want the audience to be totally engaged and even though they know what's going to happen at the end, because it's history, we want them to be on the edge of their seats. That seems to be where Kevin comes from - every time he tells a story, he's got a very strong idea of the through line of the story. When we started doing *The Last King of Scotland*, even though it's his first drama feature, in a way, to me it was exactly the same as doing *Touching the Void* or *One Day in September* because he's got that very strong storytelling talent.

After that, you worked on a few other projects, including *The Parole Officer*...

Yes, *The Parole Officer* was a mixture of DNA and Universal. British actor Steve Koogan, who did Disney's *Around the World in 80 Days*, stars in it. It's a hijinx bank-heist comedy. Lots of music, lots of fun. I worked on a bunch of British independent pictures. I'd actually worked with Kevin on some other documentary projects, that aren't listed on IMDb, but we did *A Brief History of Errol Morris*, which was shown on the festival circuit, so we stayed in touch. When *Touching the Void* came along, and I just saw the rough cut, I could tell it was a great piece of work, even in its rough state, with no music or anything on it.

What is still slightly a mystery is, how a film about two guys crawling down a mountain can keep an audience on the edge of their seat for an hour and a half. Almost nothing happens, but every time I watch it with an audience, it's fascinating because they are totally gripped. It's one of the few films where they will sit all the way through the end credits and listen to the music - which is always nice. Because I think Kevin takes them on this journey and at the end of the film they're so exhausted they just can't get out of their seats. It's really fascinating to watch an audience watching that film.

It's a unique film, merging documentary interviews with dramatic recreations...

A great stepping stone - I think it's sort of created a genre in itself. Since *Touching the Void*, there have been a lot of documentary films that have been showing in movie theaters, which is a new sort of phenomenon, certainly in the UK. *Touching the Void* was the first one that played in movie theaters and people actually went to see it, and it made some money and it got people's attention. Since then, there's been quite a lot, but it's different in the sense that it has actors in it. It's more than reconstructions - Kevin was worried when he was making it, it would turn into a disaster reconstruction thing. So what he wanted to do, certainly with the score, is score it like a movie, with a theme and a through-line and an orchestra, so the whole thing played like a drama and you weren't taken in and out of the reconstructions in a way that made you lose the through-line of the plot.

The film takes place in Peru - did you do any research for indigenous instrumentation?

One of the reasons I think the film is so popular is not because it's location specific, but it really comes down to what you would do in a situation of life and death where you just had to save yourself with your own wits. So in that sense, we didn't want to make it location specific, it's more about just engaging the audience one-on-one with Josephson and how they would feel if they were him. That's why Kevin wanted a strong music score, but something that wouldn't overwhelm the film. So what we ended up doing was having a theme, but the theme is disguised really up until the very end of the film. The full statement of the theme really only comes at the end credits, because we wanted to keep the audience going - we wanted them on the edge of their seat, and we didn't want to play all our cards too soon. So it's almost scored in a backwards sense. **[Play "End Credits" from *Touching the Void* MP3]**

Kind of like what John Williams reportedly does...

It's a nice trick - I like doing that. You don't do it always, but it gives you a way of structuring the film, and that's one of the tricks. I always think what makes a great score is a score that isn't just a succession of short bits, but it's something that adds up to greater than the whole. It all hangs together and has a structure. Again, I took my cue from Kevin. My research in *Touching the Void* was watching the film evolve. They shot massive amounts of footage, brought it back to the UK, and didn't necessarily have a clear plan as to how it was all going to be put together. I'm sure there probably was one, but to me it didn't look like it! Kevin, coming from a documentary background, seems to like to work with material and shape it, once he's got it. This was a bit more open and freeform, and it's testament to him and his editor Justine Wright, who's cut a lot of his pieces. Justine is fantastic with music as well - the three of us would sit down, and look at the film.

We actually started off doing the music before the film was finished - they cut the central scene, where Joe is climbing up the rope, and he's then cut off - which is the crux of the story. The edit of that scene was constructed, and I scored that scene before any of the film had been edited. So we felt that we had the heart of the film there, and it had some music on it. That gave me, Kevin and Justine a foothold on where the film could go - and they worked backwards and forward from that point. I'm quite lucky to have that collaboration, where you can really influence the process. **[Play "Cutting the Rope" from *Touching the Void* MP3]**

How early did you come on board the project?

Probably before they went out there to shoot - but I started literally scoring that scene as soon as they started editing, and

then once we had that in the bag, then I let them get on with it, finish a lot of the rest of the film, and then came back to it. They felt like they needed that impetus - they wanted to set the tone musically to see how they could play the drama in the rest of the film. It's an unusual way of doing it!

Sometimes that's a very difficult situation to be in because, as film composers, we're used to reacting to something on screen, and if there's nothing really there, it can be tricky. I've been asked to do it once or twice where, if I don't know the director so well, it's harder to hit the nail on the head first time if you don't know where they're coming from. If you have nothing to see, if you've got no casting, but it's exciting doing it that way! with *The Last King of Scotland*, I was certainly on board before they shot the film, and I went out to Uganda before they shot it mainly to do some prerecords which they needed for shooting, but also to get a feel of what the music is really like in Uganda so when we came to score, I'd have an insiders idea of actually what we were dealing with - not just an approximation of African music.

The movie takes place in the 1970s, and you were there in 2005 - how much had music changed in that time there?

Pop is very big, and it's moved on and they have big rap artists there that are very popular. It was much more than just writing score. There's a lot of music that plays on screen, and I went out there to find bands and artists that we could use, and cast them and record them there. So it was a real field trip! I went out not really knowing what we were going to find, literally on a field expedition to find what was good, so it was very exciting. We found some amazing stuff. In fact, we found a band called Afrigo, who were around in the '70s and used to play for Idi Amin. They're still going, and look incredibly young - I think they're taking some magic elixir, I don't know quite what it is - they don't look their age, and they were fantastic. They were very generous and let me sit in on some rehearsals.

Did they give you insight as to what Idi Amin enjoyed listening to?

Absolutely - they played me some of the songs they remembered playing back then, and what we did was to reconstruct how it would have sounded in the '70s, when we recorded it. We recorded it over there in Uganda, and so it was a bit of detective work really getting that sound.

Did you record all that music prior to filming?

Yes, the cast was all arriving, and Forest had just arrived, James McAvoy was there, as well as Keri Washington, and they were settling in, which was nice to get to know them a bit and just familiarize myself with what was going on, to give myself a bit of a heads up on what the film would be like. Which is unusual, as you know composers are usually brought on at the last minute and it's all a big rush.

So you were on board so early that you got to be on location...

I was there for the weeks leading up to the shoot, since we needed to have a certain amount of music in the bag, we were doing a cover of "Me and Bobby McGee" which needed to be shot fairly early on in the schedule. We really wanted to show that things were really quite hip in those days, there were a lot of influences of pop music coming from Europe and America - it was the '70s, and they were really going for it. There was some fantastic stuff, so we wanted to try to recreate some of it as fully as we could. There was that Scottish song we had to do for the scene outside of parliament which was fun because it was live, and the singers had never heard of it - Scotland isn't their natural music. So it was fun to get them to do their own take on it. I had to do a bit of gentle persuading, since I think people over there - while they're very talented musically - they wanted to do things a bit **too** westernized. When we were doing "Me and Bobby McGee", she wanted to sing it like Janice Joplin - and she had an American accent when doing it! I had to coax her to sing with her beautiful African accent, but once she did it it really came alive.

[Play "Me and Bobby McGee" from *The Last King of Scotland* MP3]

Same with the choir, in the end we were rehearsing in the only place we could find - an old prop store behind the theater, with corrugated iron roof, it was boiling - had to be at least 100 degrees in there. We were all sitting on old packing cases and oil drums, and they were a little bit reserved at first, and in the end I got them banging on oil drums - we got a bit of a rhythm going, they brought in some drums - and I said look, this is what it's about- doing it the way that comes naturally. In the end, I got them up dancing since they were still quite reserved, so I started dancing around to try to get them going - I thought it was hilarious, but once I started doing it they did it, and they had a great time and we got there eventually - but there were no set rules, we just had to see what was going to happen when we went out.

Did you think about the score at that time as well, or did you wait until the film was cut?

It was certainly in the back of my mind, and I wanted to familiarize myself with a lot of the instruments that they have in East Africa. One of the things we saw a lot was the big xylophone, the amadinda, which you play with two people - it's the size of a table. Two people stand opposite each other and they play it almost like they're battling each other - they sort of fight for the notes, it's quite amazing to watch. So that was everywhere and that was a sound that stayed with me. They also use a lot of different harps, the East African harp, the niatiti, and they've got big ones, small ones, tenor, soprano ones. That's an amazing sound, so I use that in the score for Idi Amin's theme - it's a harp riff that has a string theme that comes over it. Just to try and give that particular flavor - it has its own tuning, it almost sounds a bit out of tune but it gives an interesting flavor. So we used that, and we used of course a lot of the drums - the frame drums and floor drums that you get in East Africa. So a lot of that sat in the back of my mind when it came to scoring, I tried to find real Ugandan players as much as possible. **[Play "Idi's Story" from *The Last King of Scotland* MP3]**

Where did you record, if you tried to get Ugandan players?

We recorded in London - we had a 75-piece orchestra recorded at Air Lyndhurst, because the film becomes a real thriller at the end - high octave with big tension, and it needed that drive behind it. So we recorded with an orchestra, but I managed to find some Ugandan musicians living in London who played percussion and various things, and I was able to get them in and use their advice as to how you would do certain things on those instruments. **[Play "Press Conference" from *The Last King of Scotland* MP3]**

Where does one find those particular instruments in London?

Well like everything on this film, it was a bit of a treasure hunt, to be honest. Just hunting around, asking questions, phoning up the Ugandan Embassy in London. Of course, I had my orchestral contractor helping me tracking people down, and it was just fun to try and do it as authentically as possible, and try to find just the right people. I was able to fly a popular singer in Uganda called Kawesa over, he sings at the end of the film and over the end credits, so I was able to get him to London for a time to work on that. Kevin wanted to go the whole nine yards, to really make the film authentic to Uganda. **[Play "Voice of the Forgotten" from *The Last King of Scotland* MP3]**

Originally the film was going to be shot in South Africa, but Kevin was very insistent that it should be shot in Uganda because that was the only way to make it real. And you know, a lot of people in the film - like Afrigo band - remember the days of Idi Amin, it wasn't that long ago. So we did what we could, to really give it its own flavor. A lot of that music is not known outside of Africa, it's very hard to get a hold of authentic East African music, so in a sense we didn't have much choice anyways because there wasn't a lot available! But that's what's made it so fun, really.

So you produced the songs?

Yeah, quite a lot of them. Some of them, we took songs from the 70s. It's hard to get a hold of that stuff in East Africa, we were limited in what we could license in terms of songs. It was tricky - we recorded more than we needed, but we had a very good clearance person involved. She had a real job trying to find the actual copyright holders for some of those songs, because it was literally a case of tracking someone down in Kenya who hadn't been heard of in 20 years. It was a treasure hunt, really. We did record a bit of surplus material - we probably had four or five tracks left over that didn't make it in the film or the soundtrack, but it's all great stuff, and I would have loved to do a double CD with the stuff that didn't make it into the film, but the economics of the thing didn't allow for that.

Movie Score Media released your score to *Vet Hard* last year. What was the film about?

It's a very wacky comedy. It as good fun - it's a Dutch movie, and I was approached by the producers who had seen some of the British films that I've done, and I think it was *The Parole Officer* they'd seen. I was a bit reticent at first, since I don't speak Dutch, and the director was very young, fresh out of college. I went to meet him and watch some of the rough edit of the film. It's a hijinx bank heist thing, and the action sequences I watched were so incredibly well done, I was very keen to

do it. Tim Olio, the director, has got a real eye for pacing and timing, and it was fantastic. So I was on board, and we had to go record it in the Netherlands with the Amsterdam Metropool Orchestra. But it was a fun exercise in writing just a load of complicated, fun music. Comedies, and physical comedies are a lot of fun for composers because they tend to be very detailed in the story. So from rather inauspicious beginnings, it actually turned out to be a lot of fun - the movie was released in the Netherlands and Belgium, and did very well - it was one of the highest grossing films that year. To this day, there are scenes that I'm still not quite sure what they're about! <laughs> I got a translation, but it never quite seemed to add up with what I'd seen! **[Play "The Airport" from Vet Hard MP3]**

Do you find that there are more scoring opportunities living in Europe, with all the different countries and their film industries?

The scoring opportunities are sometimes different. There are a lot of very interesting small scale productions in the UK. Sometimes those smaller budgets force film makers into making innovative and interesting pictures. When scoring, your most unusual ideas sometimes come when there's not enough money to hire the standard symphony line-up. For example, I've just finished a film with Kevin Macdonald called *My Enemy's Enemy*, which was very low budget. I ended up using accordion, bass clarinet, cymbalon and a load of home made percussion that I played myself - banging boxes and packing cases and using the rain stick that I bought on holiday years ago. I'm really quite excited about the results! Raw and exciting.

What is your technique when writing music? Do you compose on paper, or work into a computer?

I work directly onto the computer, although I always have some paper and a pencil next to me. It's sometimes much quicker to jot something down. I'm probably the last generation of composer to be trained on paper, and the first to have been around for the birth of the sequencer. Once again - lucky timing!

What is your musical training background?

My background is a mixed one. I studied music at Oxford and was lucky enough to get a fantastic 'classic' music education. I did a lot of medieval and renaissance music, spent a long time trawling through dusty manuscripts in the medieval Bodleian Library. After that I tried to put my classical training behind me, and I started working as an arranger and player, doing jazz and pop sessions. I did some arrangements for a movie that Elton John scored and worked with some of the members of Blur. So these days I count myself very lucky to have had the best of both classical and pop worlds in my experience. I also studied Indonesian gamelan and some types of African drumming, which have come in useful in recent years when scoring pictures such as *The Last King of Scotland* and *Tsunami: The Aftermath*.

How did you come on board *Tsunami: The Aftermath*, and what was your approach to the score?

I had worked many years ago with Bharat Nalluri on his first movie *Downtime*. Although we hadn't seen each other for many years, this was a great project to cross paths on again. He's got a real cinematic flair and he's a clever guy. I think he pitched the show exactly right, given the sensitive nature of the material. My approach really was just to do what I would find tasteful if I were watching as a viewer. I wanted to keep the music low key in many places, but not undersell the drama when necessary. I've been heartened by many comments from people affected by the tsunami in real life that they found the music moving and effective.

You also mentioned Macdonald's new film, *My Enemy's Enemy*, about the Nazi commander Klaus Barbie...

Yes, we've just finished this picture. It's a fascinating piece of work, and very timely with its parallels with modern foreign policy. The musical idea of the film is to trace the steps of the Nazi war criminals from Germany to South America. So the music starts Germanic with marching Nazi band music and is slowly mixed with Bolivian percussion and South American flutes and accordion. Interestingly, adding the Bolivian percussion adds a sinister and intriguing flavor to it.

What else are you working on now?

I've just returned from Uganda for the Kampala premiere of *The Last King of Scotland*, and I've been doing some more recording out there with some of the artists I used on the soundtrack as part of an ongoing album project of my own. I have a number of scripts which I'm reading at the moment, but for now, I'm just spending a few weeks recovering from some hefty jet lag before facing the next adventure!

Do you have a dream project?

For me, part of the excitement of being a movie composer is the variety of the job and the not knowing what's coming up. So for that reason, I prefer to see what fate throws at me rather than trying to plan for dream projects. That way you don't get disappointed, just excited with what comes up!

The soundtrack to *The Last King of Scotland* is available from Rounder Records. *Vet Hard* is available from Movie Score Media. *My Enemy's Enemy* will be released later this year.

Special thanks to Brooke Wilcher at Chasen & Co. for her help with this interview.

[SHARE THIS PAGE](#)

Related Composers:

[Alex Heffes](#)

Related Albums:

[The Last King of Scotland](#)

[Vet Hard \(Too Fat, Too Furious\)](#)

Related Movies:

[Brief History of Errol Morris \(2000\) \[Documentary\]](#)

[The Last King of Scotland \(2006\)](#)

[One Day in September \(1999\) \[Documentary\]](#)

[The Parole Officer \(2001\)](#)

[Touching the Void \(2003\) \[Documentary\]](#)

[Tsunami: The Aftermath \(2006\) \[TV Movie\]](#)

[Vet Hard \(2005\)](#)

[My Enemy's Enemy \(2007\)](#)

We're experiencing database issues at the moment. Please try again later!