

In *The Words* of Zarvos...

Marcelo Zarvos glues *The Words* together with a lovely, neoclassical score.

By Tim Greiving



Straddling locations himself (with studios in both Los Angeles and New York), Brazilian composer Marcelo Zarvos was asked to straddle three distinct storylines, three timelines, and two continents in his music for *The Words*, the directorial debut of writers Brian Klugman and Lee Sternthal. Having tackled similar feats in *Hollywoodland* and Robert De Niro's *The Good Shepherd*, Zarvos brewed up some wonderfully lush glue to bind everything together. With a beautiful piano waltz and several minimalistic string themes, *The Words* is among a growing number of modern films graced with a prominent and elegant score.

Marcelo Zarvos: I wrote [*The Words*] from New York, just because of scheduling with other projects. I came out [to L.A.] to spot, and we recorded in Prague. I only spent a day with the directors, really, during spotting, and then we just talked on the phone, which is not abnormal these days. Everybody's everywhere, and even when I'm in the same town as the directors a lot of times I just send music to the editor and they listen and give me notes, and that's it.

Tim Greiving: You might as well be in a different state.

MZ: It really doesn't matter. There are times where it's very useful. I did another project coming out at the end of month, *Won't Back Down*, and this house [in Studio City] was not available at that point, so I ended up setting up in the cutting room. I wrote next door to the editing bay, basically. It was a first. But we were on a tight schedule, and it was good to do that. When possible it's nice to be in the same place as the director. It never hurts.

TG: What was it like working with first-time directors on this?

MZ: I've worked with a lot of first-time directors. What was unusual was that there were *two* directors. I think in this case, strangely, the fact that we were not in the same town helped, because I was talking on the phone, so I talked with both of them. They were usually in agreement, so I kind of thought of them as one.

TG: Did you talk to them separately or at the same time?

MZ: It was at the same time. Sometimes it was a conference call, where I'd chat with one just before the call, but I don't know that I ever even had a lone conversation with just one of them. They're very tight; they're childhood friends and they know each other very well and have great rapport. But it can be a little disorienting. I love having one director and you just try to understand what they want, and as far as I'm concerned, once they're happy I'm happy. No matter how great I might think the music is, it's all about the director. So when it's two you're trying to please two of them. It worked out okay in the end.

TG: Being their first time, though, were you getting input about the music from producers or other people?

MZ: A little bit towards the end, but very little. This is definitely their movie. They had control over it. Certainly Jim Young and Tatiana Kelly, the two producers I talked to, had notes towards the end, but they were very minor. I think once we found our sound, which was fairly early and pretty fast, they listened to the demos and relaxed and were like, "Okay, this is good. This is what we want." There was not a lot of drama. But it's normal that there would be producers giving notes.

TG: Was it a fairly typical project as far as the time you were given?

MZ: It was a little tight, about a month, and it was a lot of music to do in a month. But we also knew what we were going for. In some ways there's a neoclassical vibe about the score, and sometimes when you take certain elements off the table—we knew it was an orchestral score, we knew we were going to do it in Prague live, everybody playing together—then you're just dealing with themes and music and how it works, but you're not trying to reinvent the wheel. Scores where there's a lot more electronics and experimental stuff going on, you end up with a lot more decisions: all the synth sounds, the palette and stuff. If it's an orchestral score, it's an orchestral palette. Then it's about what you do with it, but a flute is a flute, and strings are strings.

TG: You said "neoclassical." What did they point you towards as far as what they wanted?

MZ: They wanted something emotional, and something somewhat—I'll say "epic," with a grain of salt. This is not epic in the John Williams sense, but it's epic in that there are three timelines and it travels all over, there's the part in Paris, which is period, and all of that. In some ways the period part dictated the rest, because

initially we thought we were going to go very orchestral and lush in the Paris sections, but then everything else was going to be a lot smaller. But then, as it happens with these things, once you put the orchestra in one section of the movie it really speaks. It's hard to then scale back, especially because the Paris section is in the middle of the movie. So we had a lot of chamber versions of themes that we were using towards the end of the film, but we decided to actually go ahead and do orchestra, because it just felt a little light where you don't want it to feel light.



Flowerly Language: Rory Jansen (Bradley Cooper) speaks with The Old Man (Jeremy Irons).

TG: How tough was it trying to keep the whole thing unified with these different storylines and timelines, and how much of your job was it to keep things unified—or to keep things distinct?

MZ: I've done a few movies like this where there are different storylines. *Hollywoodland* and *Good Shepherd* are good examples, where it jumps back and forth in time and can be kind of disorienting. One would think, and the first time I tackled a movie like that I was like, "Clearly we want to have the music for each of the sections be different." But what I found with experience, and *The Words* was definitely an example, is that the music can work better as a unifier than as a divider. What you end up is having the music be a glue for the whole thing, and really take us back and forth. There are themes that happen in Paris, but they also happen in other parts of the movie. There's just something about the jump cuts and time cuts that can start feeling slow. It can become disorienting and tedious. The music can really help bridge in those things, so sometimes pieces will start in one time period and end in the other, and that can take the listener and the viewer on this journey, and they're believing what's in there and not having to keep tabs so much. Of course you can confuse the matters, but I think it works in a slightly counterintuitive way in that sense. The music hovers over the whole thing, and keeps it as a unified story.

TG: I found that effective in *The Words*, having this same coat of paint over the whole thing.

MZ: Yeah, I think so. A lot of this is trial and error. You set out to do something, you start with some ideas of what you're going to do, but in the end—I always like to paraphrase Barry Levinson (who I've worked with a lot). He says, "You have to listen to the movie, and the movie will tell you what it needs, and it will spit out the music that it doesn't want or need." It's a very profound thing. Whenever we start any project, even in the scoring process, you come up with all these ideas—it's going to be like this and that, it starts here, ends there—but then the movie has its own way of telling you how those things are going to flow.

TG: Did you start with the Paris scenes and really focus there thematically, and then build out from that?

MZ: I like to jump back and forth when I'm working. Actually the first theme I wrote was the little [piano waltz](#) we hear when Bradley Cooper and Zoe Saldana are getting married. That's sort of a love theme, and it comes back when we're in Paris for their wedding as well. I wrote it first as a more intimate piano version, and then made a bigger version for orchestra. Then I jumped back to do the [old man theme](#). And then I jumped forward to do what we call the ["five years later" theme](#) that also happens when the young man returns from Philadelphia to Paris, this fast staccato string theme.



TG: Was there anything about the creative process, and the life of an artist, that resonated with you?

MZ: It's clearly a movie about a writer and about the process and all that, but what the directors really emphasized—and I think that's where they were really smart—is something even bigger than that. What it really is about, in their words—no pun intended—is this man (the Bradley Cooper character) coming to terms with what he'll never be. And the fact that perhaps that's the time when a man becomes a man, when a person becomes a person, is when you realize what your limitations are, and you accept yourself. And although, of course, the plagiarism is the big

Faustian bargain he makes, what I kept going back to was this man realizing what he is never going to be, when he sees this thing that is so beautiful and realizes, “Wow, I’m never going to write this.” He thought of himself as a really great writer with enormous potential. It’s also touched on in the end in this beautiful line where Olivia Wilde says to the Dennis Quaid character that, by stealing another man’s work, he robbed himself of the opportunity to find out if he was ever going to do that. That’s the Faustian part; he sells his soul in a sense, and he’ll never know.

TG: What size ensemble did you have in Prague?

MZ: We had 50 players—strings, woodwinds, harp and piano.

TG: Did you play piano on the score?

MZ: I did not. This is one of the first scores where I did not record the piano. The only other was *The Door in the Floor*. We wanted to have the whole thing done live, so we did it that way. I just oversaw it.

TG: One of the things I like about this score is this general shift of Hollywood accepting more classically oriented, lush, melody-driven, forefront scores. Are you experiencing a shift in the way directors are coming to music, more openness?

MZ: I think there’s an openness. These things work in backlashes, you know, the pendulum swings one way or the other. I think because I’ve done a few of these scores—like in this case the directors loved my music for *Door in the Floor*, which is a very dramatic, lush, melodic score. What’s interesting is it’s not the older directors looking for that stuff. These guys are very young. It’s their first movie. When I did *Door in the Floor*, it was his second movie, but a very young guy too. The older directors are not necessarily interested in that. We were always going in a different direction in Barry Levinson’s movies—unless it was like *What Just Happened*, where there is a movie within a movie and there’s some very lush music in that, but it’s almost like a parody.

I think there is openness, but also it’s a time when people, at best, are throwing their preconceptions about music out the door. That’s the best way, because you have scores like *The Social Network* and all this other stuff, the Santaolalla things, that are the opposite of that, and they work great. It’s really a choice by the director, just as it is a choice to shoot with this lens or that lens or to have more dialogue or less, big sets, small sets, CGI.... The movie I’m working on now, *Look of Love*, definitely is a dramatic, melodic, thematic score. Of course as a composer I love that, and it’s nice not to feel like you have to be hiding behind everything, and sometimes that really can be the case. But I do see it more. Not all of Desplat’s work, but a good chunk of his work is like that, and I think there are plenty of other composers doing that. What’s interesting is that there’s a generation of composers older than me, the real top guys, and that’s how they’ve always done it. Then you have some of the younger people, like myself and also much younger than me, who go back and forth. I like being able to go there, but then there might be a score like *The Bay*, Barry Levinson’s next movie, and it’s an all-synth, electronic horror score,

and it's the antithesis of all this.

It's fun for a composer to be able to jump on tradition and have a dialogue. I always think of it as we're having a dialogue with the tradition of film scoring. When I did *Hollywoodland*, it was a noir score, and I had never done anything like that.

[Director] Allen Coulter said, "We want this score to be not an homage. It's a tip of the hat to that tradition." I always think of that. If you're going to go and rip off some genre, there's no point doing that. People do it, but I'm not even that good at that, at ripping off styles. I find that whenever I do it it ends up coming out with my idiosyncrasies and—to go back to *The Words*—my strengths and my limitations.

They are what I am as a writer. But I've always found it interesting to acknowledge that tradition of film music. That's a long way of answering your question about whether people are open to these lush things, and I think it's a big *yes*.

—FSMO