



AUSTRALIAN COMPOSER TIM DAVIES TALKS WORKING ON GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S NEW NETFLIX SERIES *TROLLHUNTERS* (EXCLUSIVE)

DECEMBER 23, 2016 [LARRY HEATH](#)

Conductor and Lead Orchestrator **Tim Davies** may just be one of the busiest Aussies working in Hollywood – from conducting one of this year's most acclaimed films, *La La Land*, to TV series like *Empire* and *Revenge* and video games like *The Last of Us* his IMDB list is one of the most impressive you're likely to find. But now he's moving into the Composer's chair, for Guillermo del Toro's new Netflix series *Trollhunters*, which premieres on Netflix today.

In anticipation of the series, we talked to Tim about working with Guillermo, moving into the role, working as an Aussie in LA and we ask the all important question: how does the series compare to the book?

You've worked extensively in TV in the conductor or lead orchestrator role, meaning you worked closely with the composers of those projects. What were some of the lessons you took away from working on this projects – like the great *Empire* or *Revenge* – that prepared you for composing the *Trollhunters* Netflix series?

Coming at this after years on the 'other' side certainly has helped. Spending years watching how other composers interact with directors and producers was a great learning experience. I have also seen how everyone deals with the technical side of scoring, so I've been able to cherry pick the best methods. But the most important thing I have learnt, which is important when you are staring at a blank screen and looming deadline, is that there is always a solution and I should just trust my instincts. What seems like a huge problem or cue in the moment tends to look much simpler when I look back at it; the trick becomes trying to remember that broader perspective in the middle of a crunch.

Animation projects generally work substantially differently to a live action series or film – and between films like *Frozen* and games like *The Last of Us*, this isn't necessarily uncharted territory for you. What are some of the biggest challenges of composing for animation versus live action?

I think the style or genre dictates the music just as much as whether a project is animated or live action. So for instance, you can have live action fantasy that requires a lot of vivid music. There is also a comedic element to the score and that requires extra thought and planning. We could be in the middle of a tense chase and there might be a joke I have to acknowledge. The biggest lesson I learnt from del Toro when we were working on the pilot was to clear for the joke; just pause the music, it works 90% of the time. The music might not make much sense when you listen to it without the picture, but working together, it is perfect.

What I find the most difficult is that each episode contains its own adventure within a mere 22 minutes. There's certainly a longer arc to the series as a whole, but in order to tell each individual story in 22 minutes, things have to move pretty quickly. I don't have a lot of time to set up an emotion; I have to be right on and then move on. We often wish we could extend a scene, both to allow some more time in the action, but also to allow the music to unfurl more.

And what are some of the advantages?

As each adventure has new characters and locations I get to write lots of new themes. It is fun weaving it all together. I really enjoy coming up with unique sounds from the orchestra to match the great visuals. Even though the score is all samples (not live), I write it as if it would be played, so it still sounds real as possible. One advantage of working 'in the box,' though, is that I can call upon whatever instruments I want. If I feel like a scene needs a choir or a pipe organ, I can do that with my computer.

Please tell me a bit about how you got involved in the *Trollhunters* project, and what attracted you to it.

It is really one of those right place, right time situations! I have orchestrated and conducted video games for Sony for many years, and they set me up to work with Gustavo Santaolalla on *The Last of Us*. We got along really well and he asked me to work with him on *The Book of Life*. I ended up writing most of the underscore, based on his songs and themes. It happened that

Guillermo del Toro was the executive producer on that film. I never actually met him, but one day out of the blue he got in touch and asked if I could write some additional music for *Crimson Peak*.

Next thing I knew I was in Toronto meeting him. Another composer named Fernando Velasquez had been working on the film for a while and they needed some help with the final push. I worked with Fernando's themes which were amazing. I started out in my career as an arranger, so working with others' material is not a problem for me. As I was saying goodbye to Guillermo in Toronto, he told me he was working on a new animated show and wanted me to score it. I was completely shocked as I had not even written a note yet on *Crimson Peak*, nor ever done my own score. So I really felt the pressure to do a good job, as this other offer was at stake!

How involved was Guillermo del Toro on the project and what were your interactions with him during the production?

He was very involved at the beginning. There was quite a lot of back and forth between everyone on the first two episodes as we found our way. He still watches and signs off on everything. I do recall the first meeting at Dreamworks with him, introducing me to the other producers. It was then that he mentioned that someone else had written the main title and some themes for the show. I thought I just swore in my head, but it turns out I did out loud as well! I was like, what?

The last two things I scored I worked with other people's themes, and I'd been excited that this was my turn! But then they told me it was Alexandre Desplat, and I am a big fan of his work. The material he gave me was awesome, so it actually made my job easier. So while I wove his ideas in when the picture dictated, there was still plenty of opportunity to create my own themes and take his to many different places in the six hours of music I wrote for the first season!

Are you familiar with the source material? If so, how do you think it compares?

I read the book after I found out what the project was. I think the series is way better!

What do you hope people take away from this series when they watch it, and what do you hope people experience when they listen to your score?

I hope the music helps transport them to Arcadia and Troll Market. The score is very thematic, and I hope that after an episode or two they will recognize the themes. It is not always obvious, as I like to hide things. People can let the score float over them or really listen for the clues in there.

Overall, I think people will really enjoy the show. The characters are very real and everyone will be able to identify with someone. But being a Guillermo fantasy, there are some twists and dark humor that one might not quite expect from a children's animated show. I have heard a few of the producers say that the idea for the series is that it is del Toro for the whole family, and I really think they have succeeded in that.



**What inspired you to enter your field? What was the catalyst that took you to the USA?
Had you done much in Australia before that point?**

I decided early on, around year six, that I was going to be a musician. I was never a prodigy and I still can't play the piano, but I could always compose. I have always played the drums and my goal in life was to write for and play drums in my own big band. I have had a big band for many years now and just got my second Grammy nomination for composition. Both times the works were for big band. I have also always loved arranging, and after school I was splitting my time between that and lecturing in Melbourne. But I had always wanted to study overseas. All of the people I most looked up to had received grants to study overseas, so that became a goal.

I applied for a grant and ended up studying film scoring at the University of Southern California. I was really doing it for academic purposes, just to learn how it all worked. Film scoring was not something I had a huge desire to do, and before I came over to the States I had no real experience in the film world.

I had no plans to stay in LA and what I saw of the composing side of things did not really appeal. But orchestrating and conducting did, so that is what I set out to do, and the other composers I knew liked that about me. I did not want their job! But I did always say one day I would end up doing it, but it would be because it just fell in place, not because it was something I chased. And that is what happened.

Is there enough work for composers and conductors in Australia?

There is not enough work for them anywhere! They are both jobs that a lot of people want. There are more films made in the US and they have bigger budgets, so the orchestral scoring industry is just way bigger here than it is in Australia. I would love to be living and working in Australia.

Who are some of your idols in the field?

I was lucky enough to study with Leonard Rosenman when I was at USC and for a period after. His early scores are amazing, things like *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. He was a bit like me; he had no interest in scoring but was in the right place at the right time and ended up being offered a score. He was James Dean's piano teacher. I have worked with many composers that I look up to, and there are things that I admire about too many of them to mention. The ironic thing is that I have been asked on several occasions who I would like to orchestrate for that I have not already worked for, and my answer was always Alexandre Desplat!

Do you have any dream projects or franchises you'd love to be involved in one day?

I would like to do something dark where I had more than a half-hour episode to come up with the theme! So a movie where I get to spend some time working out material and sounds. I admire how Hans Zimmer comes up with a new palette for each score, and for that you need time.

And of the projects you do have coming out soon, what are you most excited about?

I just released a new big band album, *The Expensive Train Set*. What I am really proud of is that I recorded half of it with my band in Los Angeles, and the other half with my original band in Melbourne. The centerpiece of the album is a piece that, thanks to technology, features both bands at the same time. That album actually took me almost four years to complete, as I have been so busy. I am also really lucky to have conducted the score to *La La Land*. It is an amazing film, and I'm happy to see it getting a lot of buzz.

***Trollhunters* premieres on Netflix worldwide today. You can learn more about Tim at his [official website](#).**