

## The Elfman Project

David Newman and the American Youth Symphony embark on a three-year exploration of Danny Elfman's music.

*By Justin Craig*



**D&D and the AYS:** David Newman and Danny Elfman relax after the premiere of the American Youth Symphony's first installment of "The Elfman Project." (Photo: Jennifer Adrian-Thiroux)

Following the smashing success of *The Goldsmith Project*, David Newman, The Film Music Society and the exceptional American Youth Symphony have reunited to close the 2011/2012 season at UCLA's Royce Hall with the May 6th premiere of *The Danny Elfman Project*, a retrospective of the composer's illustrious film music career.

Newman and the AYS have cultivated their criteria of adapting the work of a native Los Angeles film composer's repertoire from screen to stage. After three years of intense focus on four decades and a variety of musical styles from Jerry Goldsmith, Newman sought a change of perspective for this new series: a living, contemporary film composer. His first and only choice: Danny Elfman.

"Danny is still a working, contemporary Hollywood film composer that has a very interesting musical output that couldn't be more different from Jerry," said Newman, taking a sip of coffee at *Le Pain Quotidien*, a bustling delicatessen in the heart of New York City's Lincoln Center.

Similar to *The Goldsmith Project*, *The Elfman Project* serves three purposes: to educate, preserve and entertain. Like its predecessor, *The Elfman Project* features an educational symposium where the public can partake in a discussion about the composer's craft and career. Co-sponsored by The Film Music Society, the

symposium allows the community to hear first-hand Elfman's opinions on his work.

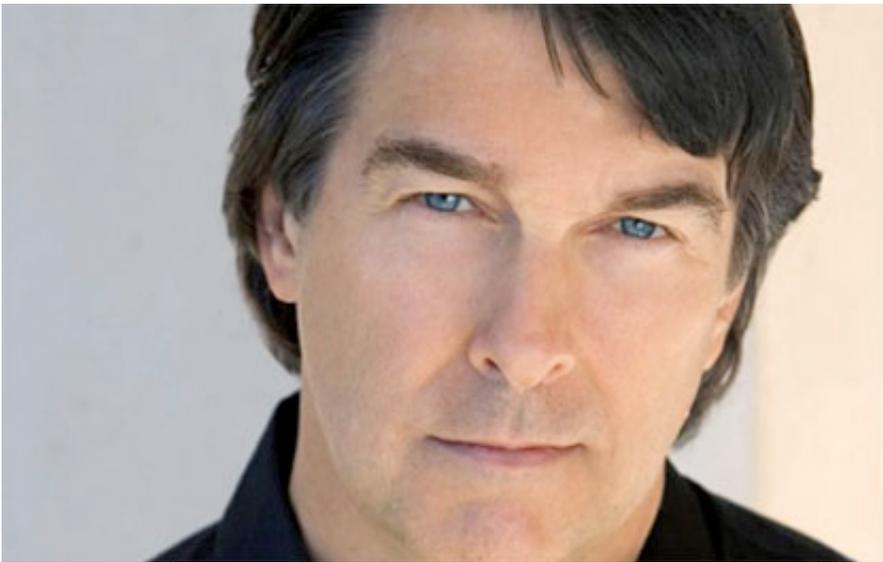
Throughout the past decade David Newman has become synonymous with film music preservation and a champion of premiering film music in the concert hall. Like the late Elmer Bernstein, who was an early advocate for film score preservation as well as the president of the Film Music Museum, which was devoted to the storage and preservation of scores as well as president of the Young Musicians Foundation, promoting fresh new talent in the concert world, Newman has become the unofficial curator for film music preservation. Just as he did with Goldsmith, Newman set about archiving, preserving and restoring (where necessary) Elfman's scores and parts for concert use.

The final thread in the tapestry is a concert by the exuberant American Youth Symphony, a pre-professional training orchestra. Founded in 1964 by Mehli Mehta, the AYS features 100 students ranging in ages from 15 to 27. These film music projects not only help restore the art of film music composition for the concert hall, but just as important, give emerging young professional musicians an additional thread of musical diversity.

Newman, with his wife Krystyna, took the idea of featuring Danny's music to the composer and his agent Richard Kraft, who enthusiastically agreed to the three-year project. With Elfman and Kraft on board, the project was a go. Newman and the creative board then took on the daunting task of deciding which Elfman scores to showcase.

Unlike The Goldsmith Project, which Newman tackled chronologically over three years, each installment of The Elfman Project will have a Tim Burton film as its centerpiece. For the initial installment, Newman chose three signature Elfman scores that diversely present the eclectic composer's dynamic range: the angelic fairy tale *Edward Scissorhands*, the Americana of *Sommersby*, and the iconic, gothic *Batman*.

Prior to the concert, Elfman and film music historian Jon Burlingame partook in the symposium, where the film music community, fans and members of the AYS were regaled with anecdotes from working with Tim Burton and Errol Morris to transitioning to the classical world and budgeting restraints in getting his non-film work recorded. The audience was also treated to the inaugural performance of Elfman's neo-classical work for the Morris documentary *Standard Operating Procedure*.



Though film music has an unfortunate and unnecessary stigma of being irrelevant in a concert setting due to its indelible marriage to its intended film and cue-based structure, Newman sees the enduring possibilities of film music in the concert hall, especially Elfman's. "I think it's very interesting concert music. I was familiar with Danny's music from the films that I've seen. But not really in this context," said Newman. "It's very intricately worked out. You can look at it like program music that's concert music. All of *Batman* works beautifully. We're doing the main title, which is like a concert overture. And we're doing the finale, which has one of the best endings to a movie ever."

Newman sees the opening cue to *Batman* as a signature example of Elfman's mastery for musical storytelling; moreover, how it perfectly translates to a concert setting. "*Batman* has a six-note motif. The beginning of the film is in this imitative counterpoint. The first five notes of that motif kind of circle around itself then they pause at a minor triad. Then there's a big huge build to this major triad. Aside from it being compositionally interesting it's really interesting how it delineates that character. Honestly, we're so conditioned to these superhero movies now. There's so many of them. Back then it was a really unique thing to have a character that was—I don't want to say an anti-hero—but had an angsty past, yet is very heroic. In these first few bars all that stuff is told, which is what I think is fun and interesting about film music, that is in some ways different from concert music."

*Batman* was a fresh challenge for Elfman, who up to that point in his film career had only scored comedies. During the symposium, Elfman reflected on creating a new musical palette that would complement Tim Burton's gothic stylings. "There's no model for any of Tim Burton's films. There was no model for *Pee-wee*, *Beetlejuice*, *Edward* or *Batman*. There was nothing to use as a template. Because at that point for big action cartoon adventure, the only model was John Williams."

One of the many reasons Newman chose the three scores to perform were to showcase Elfman's orchestrations, which are an indelible part of his signature sound. "There is always a tremendous rhythmic energy in his music. It's also very angular. The way he orchestrates is very high, very low. There's contrabassoon, a lot

of tuba, a lot of piccolo, a lot of oboe playing high, clarinet playing high. There's a lot in the high and low ranges. You hear lots of tuba, lots of low piano, lots of bass clarinet doing little things; then they get bigger and bigger."

An essential element to the project was to not create new arrangements but use each score's original film orchestrations. *Batman* has six trumpets, six horns, six trombones, two tubas, five flutes and a regular woodwind section, a huge percussion section, organ and chorus. "*Batman* is almost like a marching band theme," Newman said. "Everyone's playing this big unison theme and then it harmonizes. Then there's these flutes trying to play as loud as they can in unison. It's just part of the style. So we're doing it as originally as possible."

Newman sees a similarity in choices between Jerry Goldsmith's and Elfman's orchestrations. For the seminal score to *Chinatown*, Goldsmith made a bold choice to use four harps and four pianos, playing in unison or in thirds, creating a unique flavor for Roman Polanski's classic film noir. Elfman and frequent orchestrator Steve Bartek often take similar approaches with orchestrations, which is evident in *Edward Scissorhands*. "*Edward* is based on these little whole pitches," said Newman. "He uses two celestes. The line is two notes for the celeste. That's how *Edward* starts. But instead of one celeste playing both parts he'll have two celestes play. And the same with harps. He'll have two harps play. It just gives it a different texture. It gives it a more liquid texture."



**A Fairy-Tale Ending:** The American Youth Symphony performs *Edward Scissorhands* to picture at UCLA's Royce Hall, in Los Angeles. (Photo: Philip Holahan)

During the symposium, Elfman commented on his choice of celeste for *Edward*: "Celeste became a key instrument in *Edward* because it's a fairy tale. Of course, if you're going to write a fairy tale it's hard not to pay attention to Tchaikovsky and *The Nutcracker*. Also because of the snow and the ice, there's something about the celeste.... I knew that was going to be the primary instrument. I just wanted to bring that fairy tale element into it."

To counter the Burton films in the program, Newman included the finale from

Elfman's Americana-flavored score to *Sommersby*. While the bulk of the film was orchestrated by Steve Bartek, the finale was orchestrated by the late veteran orchestrator Jack Hayes. With guitar and banjo, *Sommersby* deftly features Elfman's ability to score against "type," conquering multiple genres and styles. Newman reflects: "I think the most difficult things in film music is you have a small amount of time to say something. How do you say it in an abstract way? *Sommersby* has this beautiful octave-ish theme, that has a wide interval skip. In other words, the theme almost uses an octave scale and it's developed and used over and over and over and builds, modulates in bits."

Elfman was hard at work on another score when he was approached by *Sommersby*'s director Jon Amiel. Quickly losing his inspiration for his current project, Elfman offered an exchange for a more suitable composer so that he could move on to *Sommersby*.

"I love movies that are *very* anything: very ridiculous, very sad, very happy, very dark, very absurd," said Elfman on stage at UCLA's Royce Hall. "And this was very romantic. It doesn't get any more romantic than have *nobody* rush up and save him at the end. There's this scene where she rushes up to him and she almost gets to the spot and he hangs. And when you see her face I thought, that's wonderful. I went from working on a movie where I felt more and more depressed to a movie where I felt jubilantly happy. I was happy with the sadness of it."

### **A Not-So-Simple Plan**

To perform *Batman*, *Sommersby* and *Edward Scissorhands* as close to the original studio sessions as possible, David Newman needed the original scores and their parts. Unfortunately, with the past as any indication between The Goldsmith Project and Newman's joint restoration of *West Side Story*, film scores and their parts are not well preserved—if at all.

Luckily, Danny Elfman's team maintained usable copies of the scores for Newman, but the parts were another matter. "I thought it was going to be easier getting the parts," said Newman. "They were in deep storage. They are corrected to a degree, but it's much more complicated than I thought."

It is understandable that much older scores like Jerry Goldsmith's intricate music to the *Twilight Zone* episode "The Invaders"—which Newman and the AYS performed during the first segment of the three-part Goldsmith Project—would be lost or damaged, but it is astonishing that scores to more contemporary films like *Batman* or *Edward Scissorhands* have suffered similar fates to scores by Alfred Newman, Max Steiner and Goldsmith. "Goldsmith, I thought, was complicated because that's so old. But this is 1989. It may as well have been in the dark ages."



Luckily, Newman was able to obtain some of the original parts for *Batman*, which were unfortunately in less-than-stellar condition. He was able to salvage the parts from different sources, including a portion of the originals, and early engravings. Between the two, though, there was still a colossal mess to sort through. “It’s so interesting to look at all the parts and scores because they have all these markings. It’s like following a map. A score is like a map anyway. You have to follow the corrections. Some of the corrections are correct. Some of them are not correct. So you have a part that’s corrected but you can’t assume it’s correctly corrected. You’re not sure that’s the part that was played or not.” David’s ultimate goal is to have all the parts fixed, recopied and engraved to a degree they are eventually available to any interested orchestra.

While *Sommersby* was easier for Newman since the parts were in much better condition than *Batman*, and the recently released *Standard Operating Procedure*’s score and parts were archived on hard drives, *Edward Scissorhands* posed the biggest challenge. “There were no parts at all,” said Newman. “There were scores but no parts. For some reason they were just gone, if you can believe that. There was a fellow at Universal who was part of Danny’s music prep team that had engraved some of them. He was able to help us get what we needed. It’s incredible—there are no parts. You see, this is a contemporary problem, as well.”

### **The Elfman Project, Part 1**

Many American and international orchestras have become complacent in performing familiar and comfortable classical repertoires, but here the American Youth Symphony stands high, mastering the challenge of performing film music with all its unconventional meters and rhythms. Don’t be deceived by the label of “youth” orchestra; the AYS is the real deal.

For the concert’s first half, Music Director and conductor Alexander Treger took to the stage at UCLA’s Royce Hall and performed Bartók’s stunning *Divertimento for Strings* and Stravinsky’s festive *Suite No. 2 for Small Orchestra*. Both pieces serve

as a reflection of Elfman's style with the striking Herrmannian strings in the *Divertimento* and the circus-like quirkiness in the Stravinsky piece.

Following the intermission, David Newman replaced Treger on the podium for the Elfman portion. Accompanying Newman and the AYS were the Women's Chorus, 32 singers who volunteered to perform for the evening.



**Playing Like Grownups:** The American Youth Symphony performs with gusto.

Channeling the intense energy in the house, Newman spritely and passionately conducted Elfman's gorgeous and angelic *Edward Scissorhands*. The celestes, choir and billowing strings, evoking Burton's fairy tale, were sumptuously played by the orchestra. After the overture, Newman conducted the orchestra in a flawless performance to film, featuring Elfman's virtuoso barber scene, concluding with the iconic "Ice Dance" and "Grand Finale."

*Sommersby* posed a challenge for the orchestra, incorporating the off-beat rhythms and ethnic instruments, but they managed the orchestrations wonderfully and performed a solid interpretation of one of Elfman's most beautiful scores.

The real power player of the evening was *Batman*, which brought down the house in uproarious applause. During the classic opening title sequence, a sheer wall of power emanated from the orchestra, rivaling the brazen power of classical works like Beethoven's Ninth and Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Following the unconditional might of the overture, Newman led the orchestra through a haunting rendition of "Descent Into Mystery," elegantly building to Elfman's bold statement of the *Batman* motif.

The highlight, though, was the gothic, spiraling orchestral tour de force "Up the Cathedral." Royce Hall was inundated with the resonating power of its organ as Newman and the AYS took Elfman's superhero music to soaring new heights.

With part one of The Elfman Project concluded, Newman and The American Youth Symphony are already looking ahead to future installments to educate, preserve and perform the music of one of the most versatile and successful film composers of our time.

As curator, musicologist, conductor and composer, David Newman has expanded the frontier for film music preservation and public awareness. The three-year Elfman Project is supported by The Los Angeles County Arts Commission, The James Irvine Foundation and Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI). With their support, preserving film music is already becoming less of a contemporary

problem.

—FSMO

*Special thanks to Cecily Lerner at the American Youth Symphony.*

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