

DOCTOR • WHO

THE END OF THE BEGINNING...

Murray Gold and Ben Foster on four years with The Doctor

“Ben, don’t look at Michael’s questions in advance, otherwise you get the heads up on what’s coming and I look stupid, which I can achieve perfectly well on my own...”

It’s a typically jovial start to my lunchtime chat with Murray Gold and Ben Foster in the canteen at BBC Cymru, Wales. The pair have a busy day ahead of them as an afternoon and evening of recording with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales – for the 2008 Christmas Special – awaits them. They are of course in high spirits as usual, the secret perhaps to an enduring professional relationship that has seen them through four series of Doctor Who. Slightly less for Ben actually as the talented orchestrator and conductor made his entrance during Series Two and has since become an integral part of the show’s musical existence. Murray has of course been there from day one, composing music for The Doctor’s 2005 re-incarnation at the hands of writer and producer Russell T. Davies. Since then he hasn’t looked back, if anything his sights have been set firmly skyward, as his music has gone from strength to strength, gaining size and power to become the most intense, energetic and exciting music ever created for a prime-time British television drama.

When you listen to the music of Series Three and Four, and moments of Series Two, it’s easy to forget that the first series sounded very different. Indeed the music that accompanied Rose’s first adventures with the ninth Doctor were cut from an altogether different cloth and while it was still unmistakably Murray Gold, it was Murray Gold on something of a smaller scale. With the popularity and longevity of the new series somewhat secured, the music for the following series’ was given more room to breathe thanks to the addition of one of the UK’s best ensembles, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Their part in the make-up of Doctor Who’s music, not to mention the appearance of Ben Foster, added a well conceived dose of the cinematic to the weekly adventures of the Time Lord and his companion and since then those adventures have been a treat not just for the eyes, but for the ears as well.

It’s been a dazzling year for everyone involved in the show, which has remained a ratings winner and kept fans guessing through another engaging, colourful and dramatic thirteen episodes. Away from the screen the impact and presence of it has been felt, not least of all in July when music from the series was performed on stage at London’s Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms season. ‘The Doctor Who Prom’ saw the world famous

venue sell out in a matter of hours and on the day fill with fans, monsters and music-lovers alike for a glittering celebration of all things Doctor Who.

Sitting down and chatting with the men behind the music, it was plain to see that while it is often a tough assignment, the results are prize enough. It appears the task of buoying up The Doctor’s adventures through music, not to mention those of the Torchwood team, continues to surprise, challenge and delight them, even after four years.

So guys, four series’ down and who knows what to go; what has this journey been like?

MG It’s been like a very slow-moving train to nowhere (laughs). No. Life’s circular I mean we’ve got to the end which is the new beginning isn’t it, and it’s circular so that means now I’m back at the beginning, or not (laughs).

BF Hang on, let me just re-cap - is it the beginning or the end of the beginning?

MG No, as T.S. Eliot said in his poem ‘East Coker’ ‘In the beginning is my end...’

BF And somebody else said in another poem something about the beginning being the end... what’s that from?

MG That’s Churchill’s speech - “This is not the end of the beginning, it’s the beginning of the end...”

BF Well, this is the end of the beginning. Print that, but pretend that I knew it was Churchill though, yeah? Not that I had to ask Murray.

Did you ever conceive how big this show was going to be when you each started on it?

MG Ben, I’ll let you answer that.

BF It was already quite big when I joined it at the beginning of the second series. It was not only a fantastic and exciting thing to do musically, but also in terms of the heritage it was pretty exciting. Also, it was already so successful after only six months of being on the telly when I started working on it. Did you know, Murray?

MG I moved to New York, where it's not big. I can never quite explain to people that it's big. I always end up looking like Noah, trying to tell people that the world's coming to an end - "It's the biggest thing, it's the biggest TV show, it's so big fourteen million people watched it on Christmas Day! Do you realise that if that percentage of people in America watched a show there would be eighty million people watching television?!" And they're like, who is this guy and why's he shouting about television? (laughs) But no, I didn't think it would be big when I took the job, I just thought it would be another Russell show, on that sort of scale - which was big enough, always a commotion. When I started doing it I didn't know there were thirteen episodes; they kept on sending me another one and I was like "I thought it had finished; someone just tell me how many more episodes there are of this, I'm supposed to be going away next week!"

BF That's why you moved to New York and then somebody got your address, so it keeps going and they keep sending them to you.

This is of course no ordinary show; the challenges must be endless.

MG They are. You know one thing I said recently to somebody was that we're actually doing a symphonic score for telly; and it's really different to a symphonic score for film because people always assume that means you've got less space to work in, because film's more expansive. But actually the opposite is true because you have to compress incident and attention-grabbing kind of episodes into the music, because of the laws of contemporary television. I have to re-set when I actually do a film because I have to remind myself that it's unlikely the audience are going to walk out and if they do it's a very low percentage. You're pretty much guaranteed that ninety-five percent of the people that came in to a movie are going to be there at the end. With television you can't think that at all; you have to be just so involved with everything and I think that's the most challenging thing. Some people say it's filmic, which it is to some extent, but I think that misses the point that it's also designed for television; it has the depth of a film score, but it has to be much denser than a film score. In fact, if anything, it's more like early film, you know, back in the old days and silent film - sometimes.

BF There's an awful lot of spots in this new one that we're doing today. Every three or four seconds there's a reason for music to be at that certain point.

MG There is an enormous number of cue hits in an hour-long episode like this one; there's forty minutes of action music, which is scored through and then twenty minutes of serious melodrama. Also, the old idea of turning on a sixpence, that quality that early film composers had where they would very quickly shift in mood, and quite subtly. I think we try and give it more subtlety, but we're still screeching to a halt and turning round and running in the opposite direction really quickly and then going from laughter to tears. The actual range, the emotional range, is so fast because you're also talking about a childlike perspective. You can have a film like Titanic which is looking at events from an adult point of view and you're still missing notes in the range that you get when

you add 'we're doing it for the children' because they really want to feel the baddie, they really want to feel the despair, they really want to feel the exuberance. We can out-exuberance anybody and we can out-melancholy and we can out-sorrow, but we have to make it so vivid and primary that it means the moments of ambiguity just sometimes have to compete for room. These things make it very energetic and energy-consuming, just writing them, and anybody who listens to any of the music - even if they don't know anything about the show - they always say it's so emotional. It does have an absolute counterpart in the amount of energy that that takes, the more heightened the energy you put in, the more difficult it is to do and the more draining physically it is; it's more of a marathon. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say I really think it's the most energetic music that any show has ever seen, and it's barmy in the way that it's like that... Good barmy hopefully.

Despite the obvious instrumental shift between Series' One and Three, it strikes me that the music has gotten bigger over the years. Are you getting braver as you go along?

MG Ben was much more integral from episodes in Series Three. I was watching an episode from Series Two, the other day - I actually paid because somebody came round to my flat and said 'what is all this Doctor Who stuff anyway?' and I wanted to play them an episode, but I have an American DVD player so it wouldn't work. So I bought an episode to play them and I thought that Series Two was going to be all orchestral and I suddenly realised that it wasn't. What did we have on Series Two?

BF Three sessions on Series Two; three big sessions. There were lots of big themes that we recorded...

MG None of the orchestral music in that series really started coming in until the space one, the one with the devil?

BF There was some in episode one...

MG Not much, just a few. It disappeared though; there were bits of it but there wasn't a library of stuff. Anyway, I won't say what episode I downloaded; I can't believe I ended up paying iTunes to download an episode!

BF But Series Three onwards is when we started doing our kind of regular sessions in London as well as Cardiff...

MG There was more of a modus operandi. There was more than just the two orchestral sessions and the session for Christmas; on Series Three there were sessions for twelve people every couple of episodes, or at least most episodes until the last four.

BF I think the important thing to say about this, the orchestral stuff, is that at the moment, while we do come to Wales and we do use a huge, massive, whistles and bells orchestra, what we also do are small sessions in London where Murray and I will select specifically the type of instruments we want. For example, the first episode of Series Four we worked on, featuring Agatha Christie, we had a saxophone, clarinet, small string section and a harp. So it's a very specific choice of instruments, and instrumentation and orchestration is important to Murray, so we talk about what the sound is. It's more challenging to have a fewer amount of instruments because you can only get a certain amount of colours out of those instruments, whereas when you come here, you get everything...

MG You have to make sacrifices, like Ben would say "well, how much running around music is there? Do we need three trombones, or can we get away with two?" Sometimes when we have just the twelve musicians we have to, like for the Sontarans episodes in Series Four - which were great big invasion of the earth episodes - they were placed within the series at a point where the orchestra weren't available. We had a bit of an extended section with that though didn't we...

BF Yeah, we had trombones, we had twenty odd players. You know you can do a lot with twenty and I think the thing to remember is that when the music is mixed in with all the sound effects and dialogue, at times there's only a certain level of it that you hear. So it's kind of an economic choice - we'll have three horns, we'll have a few violins, we'll not have a cello because you can't hear the cello anyway - we can do that with the synths. The mixing of that specific instrumentation for the Sontarans with a lot of electronic noises and stuff gives us a slightly new direction in terms of how we can use instrumentation. So we don't always have this huge orchestral sound, but we have a sound that is well chosen to fit.

MG We get two orchestra sessions a series; one has to cover the first episode or two and then the other has to cover the finale, but there's always some great big monster in the middle of it. Sometimes it works brilliantly, like on something like 'Human Nature' - which is probably the best small-scored episode that there's been...

BF That was a really nice starter one...

MG And on 'Midnight' which was the best small-scale episode this season...

BF That's a good example because on that one Murray wanted to use a kind of Recorder sound - I guess it was something to do with the melody - and the lady bought a fife as well.

MG That was 'Human Nature'...

BF Oh yeah.... So anyway we tried that with the harp and strings and there was this very intimate thing going on with Smith and the Teacher; and that was lovely, we recorded twenty-five minutes of new music for the episode with a small combo...

MG And The Ood's sound had this very particular arrangement. People remember the song, but the actual cues had a specific sound. 'Midnight' had the most particular sound because we just wanted it to be like carnivorous sounding, like a feeding frenzy, and the cues were called 'Feeding Frenzy' and 'The Feed', and 'Cars and Trombones'...

BF That was great, for some reason we had a few weeks of not doing anything and he had this great idea for this episode and said 'I want to try it with three trombones' and all this stuff and I was like 'Okay, great!'. Then I thought, well, hang on, there's a lot there in terms of the spectrum of music, we're not going to be able to do that type of music - but then I saw the episode and I realised that's brilliant because there's all that dark, cannibal, almost Planet of the Apes Jerry Goldsmith style percussion, with low piano and marimba...

MG It was tribal and slightly savage.

BF Lots of weird sounds; it was such fun and a massive, well, not risk, but it was a massive experiment certainly.

MG Yeah definitely... Every episode poses a different kind of problem of 'How do we do it now?' It's like street fighting; in a very cultivated way, you are street fighting on this show because you just don't know what's coming up. This year we got the orchestra just at the point when we were going to do the library episode and I'd already decided we'd had enough War stuff and everything should settle down for the library episode because that's the way Steven [Moffat] writes. That was one of the only episodes they had to be used for, so those two episodes ended up being very big and I'd always thought of them as being a kind of chamber piece. I suppose all these episodes have the scope to have a large scale somewhere, even 'Human Nature' ended with the great big rousing chorus of 'The Doctor Forever' so it didn't stay within its chamber confines. I like them when they do though, it's really good music.

Were there any specific surprises or challenges in Series Four?

BF It started with 'Voyage of the Damned' which for me is probably one of the best scores so far. It's so nice to have such a strong theme - 'Stowaway' - and have that all the way through the score. It felt like a complete film score, so that was a great kick off.

MG We were worried about Pompeii... I was getting signs from the production team that they were all going crazy about Pompeii. The Agatha Christie was first though; actually I never heard the music from that again until Jake [Jackson] played some of it from the album. I thought it was really nice that; great fun.

BF It struck me that it was like this Agatha Christie thing and I thought of what I remembered from my old days of watching Poirot and that kind of thing, so I thought that chamber sound would work really well.

MG We also slightly nodded to Miss Marple

BF It was brilliant. But that chamber sound was ideal for it...

MG Even on that I wondered "how do we do the Wasp?", I mean, yes, it's all set in a domestic setting, but at some point you still feel you need scale because you've got this Wasp monster from space (laughs).

BF But that's an example of where we did big stuff but with a small ensemble, so at the end of the day, if it's not big enough we just turn it up a bit. There's enough information there...

MG It's an interesting thing this, about TV, whether we actually do need the scale or not. I mean you are only subliminally aware of it sometimes. Compared to the attention to detail that we give it, you don't hear much of it. When we went to watch 'Voyage of the Damned' at the press screening, David Arnold said "geeze that must have been a lot of work, and you really only get the ins and the outs". All you really hear is the big theme climaxes and the big opening scene settings, and everything that's underneath it you're just aware of in the way that you're aware of sound in another room. Even if it is in another room, you're still aware that there's something gigantic in that next room, there's something big going on there.

BF You can't not do it though, that attention to detail like you say is crucial – there's no shortcuts to it, you either do it or you don't. If it wasn't there, then there would be a hole and if it wasn't the right thing there, it would be wrong. You'd notice. People are very used to subliminally hearing huge symphonic music in films.

That's the beauty of an album of course; you can show off the middle bits...

BF That's the nice thing about having the records...

MG Except we don't necessarily put what's been in the show on the album; you tend to have a look at it and you can't help giving it a little gloss sometimes.

Is there a defining moment of Series Four for you?

BF 'The Dark and Endless Dalek Night'. For me that was great, so musically that's my defining moment, the return of the Daleks.

MG The moment that I say "hooray, I've finished" gets closer and closer to the point where I say "oh my God, I've started". I think this summer, it was about a week and a half! I actually sent a message to friends of mine - I was sitting in a champagne bar on my own when I did the last tinker on episode thirteen of Series Four - so I sent this message saying "Join me, I've finished my work for the year" and they came and joined me, but within a week I couldn't come out because I was too weighed down with stuff again. It does get hard, but I don't want to talk about it all in terms of it being a chore or of how much you start to long for it to be over (laughs)... We scored big time though; it's a good series.

So has this album been particularly tough to get right?

MG Jake Jackson should get a co-producer credit for this one because essentially he's assembled the album. He's the poor wretch who had to trawl through every episode of music, trying to flag up that which would sound great. I think he ended up with about two-hundred minutes...

BF We'd have ended up with three-hundred minutes though. I think it's good that it's somebody who, although Jake was very involved in the process, isn't too involved.

MG The funny thing is, the album he came up with first was not a Doctor Who album in the style of the two that came previously. It was very esoteric, very adult sounding and full of cues that were interesting, but not ones that I would want to put on, and not ones I would imagine the kids who buy the album would go to first. So I said "what are you doing?" and he was like "well, this is all great music" - these were meandering kind of journeys, kind of abstract, and you forget that that's in there actually and he managed to get about ninety-minutes of music which was almost Radiophonic sounding, plus acoustics. Away from the episodes the synthesizers sounded interesting, not for a Doctor Who album though; so I kicked his ass (laughs) and told him to go and find some tunes.

And did he get it right?

MG Yeah, and he has edited together more suites this time, so I think the tracks are longer. I did occasionally say to him "no, you can't throw 'Song for Freedom' three and a half minutes into the track" because, again, the kids are going to want to put on track eleven or whatever it is and have it come straight in. So he said "oh don't worry, we'll just put an index in...", so I hope people don't complain about it too much. Also there are some points where we might get to a real highlight and I might have kept it going a bit longer than Jake has; but we're really short of time. I actually thought rather than put two lots of thirty-two bars and make it go round again, the kids can do that themselves and meanwhile we'll put more new stuff on the album. If they want it to repeat they can make it repeat on their computers; kids, honestly they're so smart! Ordinary adults will just have to press play again...

BF Build your own Doctor Who album...

MG They do anyway!

You've been working together now for a few years; what's your process..?

MG Well, I yawn and go out whoring in New York, whilst Ben is locked into a cabin in Pinner, waiting for me to die so he can inherit everything (laughs). No, the process is that Ben has a very steady emotional life and is capable of a great many hours of industry a day...

BF It is killing me...

MG No, it is killing him.

BF It is hard work.

MG It's nothing to do with how little I know about orchestration, it's just speed; Ben orchestrates about twenty times faster. Obviously I know just as much about it all as him and if I was better at computer programming then I could do it.

BF I'm just a whiz.

MG It does vary from project to project, I would say on this Christmas special I probably leant on Ben more than anything before. There's a certain amount where I can be helpful in terms of suggestions - sometimes there's already a very clear picture of what sounds I want, then there's the kind of thing where I just give like all of the notes on piano - so you get all the tune and the harmony, all the notes are there, but there's really no indication other than that. Then, like for this one, Ben asks for a very general thing... on 'Runaway Bride' I said make it Leonard Bernstein-ish and 'Voyage of the Damned' was very 1940s. So Ben often orchestrates the whole thing from piano; it's partly a time thing. There's no point me just putting everything on electronic instruments; they sound crap and in some ways they're not even as clear as just having a piano track. He does stop me taking too many liberties, or sometimes I just refuse to do things and Ben steps in to keep the peace.

What has been the highpoint for you so far after four years?

MG It's got to be the Prom.

BF That was crazy... but the concert we did in Cardiff was crazy as well.

MG For me personally, taking to the stage at the Albert Hall and just sneaking down the left aisle, hearing this volume of applause come up and I wasn't realising it was for

me, and then Ben giving me this special count in for 'Doomsday' because I can't follow the conductor (laughs).

BF It was great having Murray on stage playing it as well; that made it even worse, in terms of the emotion; it was really great to do it together.

MG I pretty much forgot that we were going out live on [BBC] Radio 3 and that we had an orchestra and two-hundred people on stage and I just said to Ben "come on then, we're doing an encore, let's go from section F!"

BF So I had a look at the score and was like okay... "Section K, everyone, K" and they all started joining in and I turned round to the audience like this [starts clapping]. It was brilliant though, definitely a highlight. But walking out on stage at the beginning of it, hearing the audience clap... that was brilliant and absurd. It was a wonderful day...

Where's all this going then... where are you headed?

MG I don't think we can answer that... it's a combination of voices. Ben's involved in the two movies that I'm doing, so who knows. I'll tell you one thing though, in the last four years we've made some really good music, I mean for both shows, really, really good music. It's got balls, and a lot of love, and that ultimately is worth being happy about.

BF It's worth the hard work. I listened to that 'Voyage of the Damned' score last week and I hadn't listened to it for maybe eight months; I was proud of everything and was actually surprised at how good it was. I heard stuff I'd forgotten that we'd done; everything is done so quickly, so swiftly, in this relationship you have to fly by the seat of your pants and rely on each other I guess.

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