

# Los Angeles Times

## ‘Da Vinci’s Demons’ composer Bear McCreary scores with Calder Quartet

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Bear McCreary conducts the Calder Quartet as he composes the score for a second-season episode of "Da Vinci's Demons" at the Bridge Recording Studio in Glendale, Calif. (Chris Pizzello/Invision for Starz/AP Images)

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As a classical-music ensemble with a sterling critical reputation and a flair for the contemporary, the Los Angeles-based Calder Quartet is used to playing at some of the most prestigious concert venues around the world.

On a recent winter morning, however, the musicians were in a modest studio in a not-so-glamorous stretch of Glendale dominated by shabby industrial warehouses. Passing freight trains emitted a repetitive ka-chink as they moved through the area on rusty tracks.

Inside, a rhythm of a different sort was at play. The quartet was recording (and re-recording... and re-recording) a staccato passage for the soundtrack of the Starz drama series “Da Vinci’s Demons.” Leading them from the podium was the series’ Emmy-winning composer Bear McCreary.

The 35-year-old McCreary demanded the musicians repeat the passage several times, suggesting slight changes in their interpretation with each take.

“Maybe a little less vibrato on your end,” McCreary told violinist Benjamin Jacobson. Later, he admonished the group for rushing: “We’re definitely ahead. We’re caffeinated. Focus on the click.” (The players wore earpieces that provide a metronomic click to help them keep time.)

The musicians were scoring a scene from the second season of the historical drama series that follows a fictional Da Vinci (Tom Riley) on his exotic adventures. The season, which debuts Saturday on Starz, was shot in Wales, but much of the post-production, including the scoring, took place in the L.A. area.

Musicians of the Calder’s caliber don’t necessarily have to accept studio day jobs, but their connection to “Da Vinci” was somewhat personal. The musicians had first met McCreary when they were students at USC’s Thornton School of Music.

“We all showed up for freshman year music theory,” recalled violinist Andrew Bulbrook. “Bear showed up to theory wearing an Oingo Boingo T-shirt and talking about Danny Elfman.”

The violinist said McCreary would practice his accordion “day and night in the dorm.”

The composer recalled that Bulbrook played the first piece he composed for solo violin. “At the end, I wanted a low note so I told him to de-tune the G-string,” said McCreary.

Earlier in the day, the Calder musicians scored other parts of the “Da Vinci” season with members of a larger studio orchestra. A typical episode of “Da Vinci” contains 30 to 35 minutes of music — which is a lot compared with McCreary’s work on AMC’s “The Walking Dead,” which he said features about 10 minutes of music per episode.

The speed of television scoring — an episode can sometimes be completed in a matter of days — was something that the Calder Quartet had to adjust to when they first worked on “Da Vinci” last season.

“As a quartet, we could talk about a measure [of music] for an hour,” said Bulbrook.

The series’ title sequence, which won McCreary an Emmy Award, is a minute-long piece of music that can be played forward and backward and was inspired by the real-life Da Vinci’s method of writing backward with the aid of a mirror.



Series creator David Goyer, left, and composer Bear McCreary during a scoring session for “Da Vinci’s Demons” at the Bridge Recording Studio on Jan. 29 in Glendale. (Chris Pizzello/Invision for Starz/AP Images)

David Goyer, who created the series, said that the title sequence was initially just 40 seconds long, but he decided to add 20 seconds because he liked McCreary’s music so much. “I wanted a call to adventure for the theme,” said Goyer.

McCreary hails from Seattle and lives with his wife in Culver City. Early in his career, he was mentored by the late Oscar-winning film composer Elmer Bernstein. At a recent concert of Bernstein’s film music in L.A., McCreary performed music from “To Kill a Mockingbird” on the accordion.

McCreary tends to work at a breakneck pace, taking just a week to 10 days to compose the music for one episode of “Da Vinci’s Demons.” (The title sequence took him five days to compose, he said.)

In addition to his work for cable TV, he is also scoring the Marvel series “Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.” which airs on ABC. He gained a great deal of attention for his work for Ronald D. Moore’s landmark reboot of the science fiction series “Battlestar Galactica.”

For network TV, “sometimes you score an episode and it airs 10 days later,” the composer explained. “On cable, I have more time to focus on fewer episodes.”

In actuality, it’s a team effort. McCreary has a small group of musicians who assist him with the scoring process, from orchestrating his compositions to overseeing the recording sessions.

The Calder Quartet – whose members also include violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers – have collaborated with McCreary outside of Hollywood. In 2012, the ensemble debuted a McCreary piece titled “A Hypocrite and Slandererer” at a performance at the Getty Center commemorating the work of sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt.

The quartet members said they hope to team up again with the composer in a concert setting.

In the near term, the quartet can be seen at Walt Disney Concert Hall on April 8 in a Green Umbrella concert featuring music by Steve Reich and other contemporary composers.

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