

THE PERFECT SCORE

For the soundtrack of next month's *Gone Girl*, director David Fincher revived an award-winning partnership with Nine Inch Nails rocker Trent Reznor and music producer Atticus Ross.

BY CHRISTOPHER ROSS
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BROTHERS GRIM
“It’s been an uncompromising,
fantastic creative process,” says
Reznor (left) of scoring films
with Ross (right) for Fincher.

MUSICIANS TRENT REZNOR and Atticus Ross are sitting in a studio in Hollywood, staring down the barrel of a rapidly approaching deadline with an air of game fatalism. Their score for David Fincher's new movie, *Gone Girl*, in theaters October 3, is due the following week. This is their third collaboration with the auteur, and expectations are high: Their first score for 2010's *The Social Network* netted an Oscar for best original music, and their second effort on 2011's *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* garnered a Golden Globe nod and a Grammy for best soundtrack. Ross, 46, a cerebral London-born composer and producer who has frequently co-produced with Reznor, pulls distractedly on an electronic cigarette. Reznor, the 49-year-old Nine Inch Nails frontman, sits tensely in his chair with the manner of a man on his seventh caffeinated beverage of the day. As soon as the score is in, he'll be hitting the road on a NIN tour, while also continuing his work with Beats Music, which was recently acquired by Apple. "I can't say it hasn't been on the verge of overwhelming in terms of workload," he deadpans in a sonorous baritone.

Today they'll listen to music for the film they recorded the day before with a live orchestra. That was a first for Reznor, who since the 1989 release of his first Nine Inch Nails album, *Pretty Hate Machine*, has been a pioneering figure in the genre of heavy, machine-made music classified as "industrial." Releasing eight major studio albums through the 1990s and into the present, he built a global following with hits like "Closer" and "Head Like a Hole" that channeled dark emotions—rage, alienation, anxiety—into bleak but expertly produced, synth-riddled soundscapes. Along the way, he transformed from the long-haired, mud-caked banshee of '90s music festivals—today he's sporting a trim haircut and a tight black T-shirt, and he maintains a strict regimen of eight-hour workdays. His career arc is not unlike Fincher's, who similarly achieved both commercial and critical success over the past two decades with films—including *Seven*, *Panic Room* and *Zodiac*—that delivered gorgeously shot visions of terror and paranoia. Together with Ross, a collaborator of Reznor's since 2000, they've formed one of today's most compelling interdisciplinary partnerships.

For *Gone Girl*, an adaptation of Gillian Flynn's 2012 best-selling literary thriller about a husband, Nick Dunne (played by Ben Affleck), who becomes a suspect in the disappearance and possible murder of his wife (played by Rosamund Pike), Fincher had a very specific inspiration for Reznor and Ross to start with. "He said, 'Think about the really terrible music you hear in massage parlors,'" says Reznor. "The way that it artificially tries to make you feel like everything's OK. And then imagine that sound starting to curdle and unravel."

Fincher recalls the initial conversation slightly differently: "I said a spa, not a massage parlor!" he says, laughing. The idea first came to him while he was getting his back adjusted. "I was listening to that calming,

placating music and thought, we need to tap into this. The movie is about the facade of the good neighbor, the good Christian, the good wife. So the notion was to start with music that's attempting to give you a hug." The result is a score composed of lilting, haunting synths interspersed with doleful piano melodies and accentuated by the orchestral arrangements.

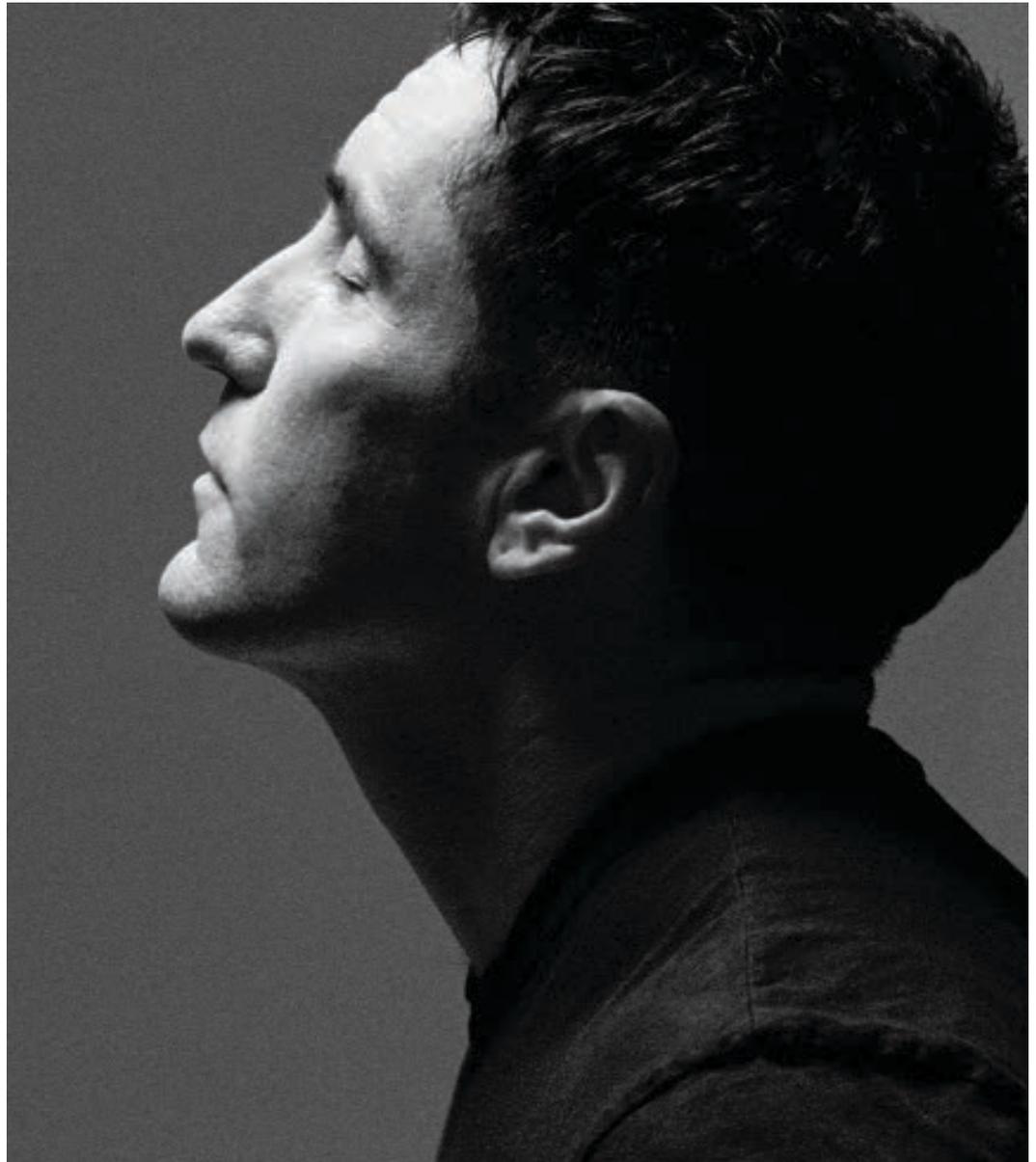
Fincher and Reznor had crossed artistic paths earlier in their careers—the director made the music video for NIN's 2005 single "Only" and used a remix of Reznor's "Closer" on the opening credits sequence of 1995's *Seven*. But it was only when he was working on early versions of *The Social Network* and found himself using elements from NIN's 2008 album *Ghosts I-IV* as a temporary score that he decided to ask Reznor to try his hand at creating an entirely new soundtrack for

a feature-length movie. Reznor, who was burnt out from touring and had just gotten married (to singer Mariqueen Maandig, with whom he now has two sons), politely but firmly declined Fincher's advances. A few months later, Reznor reached out to apologize again for not being able to accommodate the director's offer, and Fincher managed to convince him to take on the score. Once he'd accepted, Reznor tapped Ross, who had some experience composing for film and TV, to help.

The L.A.-based musical duo first met and became friends in the early aughts. Ross—brother of model Liberty Ross and the son of Ian Ross, founder of the '60s pirate radio station Radio Caroline—began lending his technical wizardry to Nine Inch Nails in 2000. In turn, Reznor consulted on and co-produced Ross's band 12 Rounds, which Ross started with his wife,

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BEHIND THE MUSIC Reznor, right, says he and Ross, far right, always put narrative first. For *Gone Girl*, "We'll think about the walls closing in on Nick. How does that sound?"

singer Claudia Sarne, with whom he has two children. (Ross also has a son from an earlier relationship with Amy Fleetwood.)

Reznor and Ross's approach to scoring is singular in mainstream cinema. With a few exceptions, notably 2007's *There Will be Blood*, which Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood scored, and 2009's *The Road*, which has an original soundtrack by Australian musicians Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, classically trained composers write scores for films that are already locked or in the final editing stages. It's a cut-to-fit procedure that puts the emphasis on efficiency. "Like buying things by the yard," says Fincher. At most, a pop star might contribute an original song to play over the film titles or credits (as Adele did for the latest James Bond iteration, *Skyfall*, for example). But Reznor and Ross often begin talking about the role of music with Fincher even before the first scene has been shot, so that their score evolves in tandem with the movie's production, operating like an alternate script that shapes the direction of the film as it is in turn shaped by the film. "It's multiple times the work because you're fixing and modifying and rewriting right up to the end," says Reznor. But it's that quality, Ross says, that gives the score a feeling of seamlessness. "The music becomes part of the film's DNA," he says. "To create that transporting experience in the cinema, all the different elements of the film need to be one piece of art."

For *The Social Network*, Fincher asked for "the sound of creativity," and Reznor and Ross responded with '80s-era synths and pointillist electronica whose rhythms seemed to reflect a speeding mind in danger of running vertiginously off keel. Fincher actually trimmed the film down 10 minutes in response to the score, and one scene—the much-applauded Henley Royal Regatta sequence—was edited entirely to fit Reznor's madcap, Moog-like version of Edvard Grieg's 1875 piece "In The Hall of the Mountain King." The score for *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* had a more abrasive, droning quality, befitting its hacker-punk hero Lisbeth Sanders and the film's icy, Nordic landscapes. Reznor and Ross blurred the line between music and industrial sounds, in one scene tuning the score to the hum of a floor polisher that appeared onscreen. When beginning on *Gone Girl*, the duo stumbled across the haunting woodwind-esque motif while playing with homemade synthesizers, a sound that gradually evolved with the movie into queasy orchestral melodies. "The piece travels the journey of the story," says Ross, "mutating within itself from something that feels warm and loving to something that feels so sick. But we close on the same music we open on."

Over the course of the past seven months, Reznor and Ross composed batches of music that resulted in two hours of raw themes for the film. Their work reflected what was developing onscreen. "It's fun for us to go off on tangents and operate in purely subconscious mode," says Reznor. "We'll think about that feeling of the walls closing in for Nick. How does that sound?" Instead of focusing on technicalities, the two speak the language of narrative with Fincher and his team, seeing themselves as sonic storytellers. "It's never, 'This needs to have a lot of reverb,'" says Fincher. "The conversation is almost always, 'What feeling are you trying to evoke?'"



They're world creators—what they do with music is not unlike what CGI artists do visually."

In the studio, Reznor and Ross operate like two lobes of the same brain, the latter structuring and shaping the former's intuitive vision. Over the years, they've honed their method to the point that it's nearly nonverbal: Reznor begins playing with a number of unstructured melodies and musical themes, which he then hands to Ross to arrange. "That process frees me up to lose myself in raw composition, impressionistic stuff almost," says Reznor. "And I can leave the room, catch my breath while he's mocking it up, and when I come back in, four out of five times, it's better than the thing I had in my head. Without me saying one word."

Both men project a capacity for self-control that suggests their preference for expressing emotion through music. "They're both extremely quiet," says Fincher. "They're not the kind of guys who get nervous that they're not saying anything. It's not a cultivated opacity—they just hold their cards close. They don't have time for a lot of bullshit."

Reznor and Ross's award-winning track record

scoring films for Fincher has naturally made them a hot commodity in Hollywood. But they have little interest in composing for anyone besides Fincher. "Having limited experience with others, I've been astounded by the clarity of his vision—especially when you've seen it not be that," says Ross.

That said, both Reznor and Ross perceive in the medium of film a rare opportunity to immerse an audience in a collective artistic experience. In an age when most music concerts are a sea of cellphones and digital devices, "the cinema is the one place left where people switch off their lives," says Ross. For Reznor, whose live concerts feature a Wagnerian assault of visual effects, lights and video screens, it's as if movies have become a final refuge for music appreciation in an era of near-constant distraction. "For a couple hours, they're locked into the story, escaping their lives, being taken on a journey," says Reznor. "As a musician, it gets back to being able to emotionally connect with somebody. At the end of the day, what matters to me is that I can get what's in my head into your ears." ●