



At 'Matilda' in Concert, Composer David Newman, Danny DeVito and NJ Symphony Orchestra will Share the Stage

MADDIE ORTON, Host ([00:02](#)):

Composer David Newman is part of the most Oscar-nominated extended family of all time. You probably know his cousin Randy Newman, or the work of his brother, Thomas, and father, Alfred. And you certainly know many of the 100+ films David has scored, including the 1997 animated classic *Anastasia*, for which he received his Academy Award nomination.

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra will play the score to one of my favorite of David's films, the 1996 adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* live alongside a screening of the movie at the State theater on Friday, March 22nd. David will be there to conduct the orchestra, and New Jersey's own Danny DeVito, who directed co-produced, acted in, and narrated the film, will perform his narrator role live too. *Matilda*, which also features terrific performances by Mara Wilson and Rhea Perlman, tells the story of a super smart little girl with superpowers who fights evil and finds joy in outlandishly terrible circumstances.

I talked with David Newman about the process of scoring films like this one, his legendary family, and his work preserving film music for future generations. Take a listen.

MADDIE ORTON

David, thank you so much for your time today. It's so nice to meet you. You've scored so many of my favorite films.

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DAVID NEWMAN ([01:24](#)):

Oh, it's lovely to hear. Thank you. I appreciate it.

MADDIE ORTON ([01:26](#)):

So you're going to be conducting the score to the film *Matilda* played by New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. What does that mean for people who've never seen a film score performed live?

DAVID NEWMAN ([01:38](#)):

You sit down, the film starts and the music is muted. So we play the music live, but it's the soundtracks from the film, so it is watching the film, it's just the orchestra part is playing live. That's what it is.

MADDIE ORTON ([01:52](#)):

And Danny DeVito is going to be narrating this live as well, right?

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DAVID NEWMAN ([01:55](#)):

Yeah, this is an unusual thing. Generally in a movie you wouldn't do that, but Danny narrated, Danny directed the movie and there's narration all through the movie. So we thought it would be a fun thing to have him along for the ride and do the narration live. So we took the narration track from the film, from the dub, what we call the dub or the mix of the film, and we have that as a separate track so it can be muted if he's there. If he's not there, it's unmuted and you hear it as it is in the film.

MADDIE ORTON ([02:25](#)):

I mean, it's very cool because it is such a storybook element and I feel like it almost is like Danny DeVito is reading you as a story with a live orchestra.

DAVID NEWMAN ([02:34](#)):

Yeah. He'll come out and sit in an armchair and start telling the story of this little girl that she's like a knight-errant. It's almost like she's Don Quixote for this woman that she meets that's kind to her. And she sort of fixes her life. It's a beautiful little story, a little parable. Like a lot of Roald Dahl's stuff, it's got a lot of dark stuff in it, but it's a beautiful little metaphoric story about something that's kind of lovely that she's saving this person that she loves and everybody else in her life is so awful.

MADDIE ORTON ([03:08](#)):

And Danny DeVito does just such an incredible job of being such a terrible person in this movie. He's fabulous in it.

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DAVID NEWMAN ([03:16](#)):

Yeah. Well everybody in the movie's terrible except for Miss Honey, and Matilda, and her friends, but she defeats them. I mean, she's a fearless little knight. That's why it's so much fun to do a movie like that. With music you can do a little bit more because it's sort of a fairytale. It's "once upon a time long ago there was a little girl." It has those sorts of elements. It can be a little more operatic in a way, and it doesn't distract from the film. So we're really happy to do it live.

MADDIE ORTON ([03:47](#)):

I mean, I grew up watching this movie. I'm a huge fan of this movie, and I re-watched it in preparation for this conversation and I was really attuned to the music in it. And I had seen *Casablanca* performed by New Jersey Symphony Orchestra years ago. Similar situation. They pull out the music.

DAVID NEWMAN ([04:05](#)):

Yeah, it's the same thing.

MADDIE ORTON ([04:07](#)):

And it was such a phenomenal experience because I think if you are somebody like me who is not a professional like you, I don't always hone in on the music the way I did when I heard it live. And it really changed the film watching experience for me.

DAVID NEWMAN ([04:24](#)):

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Yeah, that's the thing about movie music that's so hard to understand. It's so weird because talking films didn't start that long ago. It's 1930, it's right after the stock market crashes in America. And there are a lot of Jewish refugees that are in Hollywood that have been working on silent film, but there's this incredible technological disruption where you can now put sound on films. And it's hard for us to imagine what that would've been like because before *The Jazz Singer*, which was like 1927, 1928, which there's just a little bit of sound on it by 1930, there's like sound. There're stories, and it's this whole new weird art form. And then music becomes a part of it and they have to decide, well, what is music doing in a movie? Is it like, okay, so some band's playing on the movie. Okay, so there's music and everything, but when it's this underscore thing, which is what we think of as music and movies, it's underscore, it starts commenting on what's going on and then it starts doing things that visual elements and oral elements dialogue can't do, and then it tends to unify it. But the thing is, if you're studying film and you're studying music in film, unless you take it away, you just can't tell what it's doing.

MADDIE ORTON ([05:50](#)):

I'm noticing that you're using the music to help transition between scenes or between time periods or to establish characters or locations. And so what I was wondering is what is your process? Take *Matilda*. Are you sitting down and looking at a script and a storyboard and having a chat with Danny DeVito or are you getting video files and going through and scoring it that way?

DAVID NEWMAN ([06:19](#)):

John Williams is sort of the uber late 20th century film composer. Basically what he says is correct is that it's all pointless looking at a script. There's a script, there's production, they shoot the film, everything changes, right? Casting changes everything, location scouting changes everything. And then they get into what you're saying, editing and that changes everything. So ideally for music, you want a locked picture. Now normally you're not going to get a locked picture, but you treat it as a locked picture.

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MADDIE ORTON ([06:56](#)):

And for anybody who doesn't know what that means, a locked picture, picture lock means that it is in its final form just in terms of the length and where the cuts are.

DAVID NEWMAN ([07:05](#)):

Right. Because music, because unlike every other aural element in film, music exists in a serial manner through it. So if you edit something, if you take out a half a second, it screws up all the music. So you either have to inform the music or rewrite the music and you can see ad nauseum how this might become a problem if you're working while they're editing, and most of the time you are, you have to learn how to deal with this. If it's not locked, but you still need to write, eventually you need to decide that this scene is locked. You do it in scenes, you do what's called spotting the film. And I think spotting, it's an old term, and I think what it means is if you took the whole film and rolled it all out, old analog film, you'd spot music goes from here to here, it stops, goes from here to here, it stops, goes from here to here, it stops.

MADDIE ORTON ([08:05](#)):

And then those scenes you would work on. And quite frankly, movies are so weird because you're collaborating. It's collaborating with a non-organic human media. You are collaborating with directors and editors and all that. But really what you're doing is collaborating with a film. And as you probably know, the more you edit something, it starts to tell you what to do. Sure. You try something and you think, 'oh, this should work.' And then you say, 'Ugh, that doesn't work.' And then you do something else and it might be something that you don't even realize and then it works. And so really good filmmakers and directors, they start to follow the film, what the film is asking for. And the same thing with the music.

MADDIE ORTON ([08:51](#)):

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So you and Danny DeVito have worked together on how many films?

DAVID NEWMAN ([08:55](#)):

Maybe six.

MADDIE ORTON ([08:56](#)):

Yeah, it seems like it was several

DAVID NEWMAN ([08:57](#)):

Five six. I think.

MADDIE ORTON ([08:58](#)):

You're clearly frequent collaborators. Is there something about that relationship that is really great for you? I am sure Danny DeVito obviously huge New Jersey person. We all adore him here. What is it about working with him that's been so great for you and vice versa?

DAVID NEWMAN ([09:17](#)):

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Yeah, I mean, he has a weird point of view in *Matilda*. There's a lot of interesting point of view and he's very operatic. It's very big and dark and then grand. And the first one we did was *Throw Mama from the Train*. Then we did *War of the Roses*. *War of the Roses* is a divorce to the death and *Throw Mama from the Train* is a take on strangers on a train. And then we did *Hoffa*, which was an anti-hero movie, well before there were anti-heroes. And then *Matilda*, which was his take on this Roald Dahl story, a lot of the way where he puts the camera and kind of the colors and the, it's very evocative for music.

MADDIE ORTON ([10:04](#)):

You grew up in a musical family. Your father was a film composer. Your cousin is Randy Newman. I think I read you are the most Oscar-nominated composer family of all time, something like that.

DAVID NEWMAN ([10:21](#)):

Well, my brother Tom has I think 13. Randy's won a couple and has a lot. I just have one and my dad had like 54 nominations. So yeah, the thing is, my father was born in 1900 and he was in Hollywood in 1930. So remember I was saying that that's when talking films really became commercially viable. So he was one of the pioneers. So Alfred Newman wrote the Fox logo, so he wrote that, oh my God, right In 1933 when he was at UA, he was at 20th Century Fox from 1939 to 1959. He died in 1970. So in my family there were five kids. My younger brother Thomas is just 18 months younger. Him and I are doing film music. And my cousin Randy, he's a big recording artist. "I love LA" and "Short People." And then my father's brother, Lionel, was head of Fox from the middle 1960s to 1984. He was best friends with John Williams. John Williams went through the Fox system. It's a whole thing. Then there's a younger generation Lionel's kid. Joey is working now. Tom's kid, Julia Newman just did *Feud*...

MADDIE ORTON ([11:47](#)):

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FX--Truman Capote

DAVID NEWMAN ([11:49](#)):

It's about Truman Capote that show.

MADDIE ORTON ([11:51](#)):

It's fabulous.

DAVID NEWMAN ([11:52](#)):

Yes. So it's sort of a siren song in our family. Nobody went after it of our generation. I wanted to be a conductor. Tom was doing Broadway and Randy was a recording artist, but we all just sort of gravitated towards it because it's so much fun when it works and it's not lonely because you're working with a whole bunch of people and then there is a certain legacy about it that is alluring without being oppressive. My thing is, as you can probably tell, I'm really interested in my father. I mean, if you watch a 1931, 32, 33 movie, it's so weird. My father did a movie in 1931 called *Street Scene* and the way it's scored, and then if you watch films in '32, '33, it's just so weird. And then by 1939 it's like *Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* and *Wuthering Heights* sort of technologically and artistically or figured out what that style was.

([13:04](#)):

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So my dad, they're on a postage stamp, him and Max Steiner and Bernard Herman and all what they would call the pioneers. I was trying to find letters and things that they wrote about, they didn't know what to do, how much music to put in it or so interesting. So they're all sort of trying to figure out, do I treat it like a play where you just have little incidental music or is it just what we call you just use diegetic music, which means you can only use music from something that is referenced by something that's happening on the film, like

MADDIE ORTON ([13:39](#)):

A band playing or something,

DAVID NEWMAN ([13:41](#)):

A band playing or whatever. And then you can use that, maybe use that artistically in some way to do it. Or what they sort of settled on was this kind of what they called commentative music, which really is a combination of Wagnerian sort of concept of what Wagner would call, well, he wouldn't have called it, but they called it light motifs, but basically themes for places, people, things, whatever. And then referencing the same theme to make it into kind of an abstract story. But they really didn't, it took them four or five years to sort of land on that to have the directors and producers are really timid about doing that. They didn't really know what to do. And my dad before that in the twenties was conducting Broadway shows. He didn't write any music until he was 30, until he came to Hollywood. It's a really interesting, weird history that hasn't really been--it's very American too, and it hasn't really been thought out yet. I mean there is a lot of writing about it. There's a lot of scholarship about it, but it's not even a hundred years old. So it's a little bit in terms of the sort of western art cannon, it's still looked down upon a little bit. It's not really understood yet. And you can see the difficulty in getting extant material and studying it and seeing what it does.

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MADDIE ORTON ([15:08](#)):

You focused a lot of your career also on film music preservation. Tell me a little bit about that.

DAVID NEWMAN ([15:15](#)):

Yes, I have. From my early days, I've been interested in performing some of this music that I loved, and I found that it was very difficult to get it because the studios that own the music weren't very good at preserving it or databasing it. Or of course at the time they couldn't even digitize it. But now they could digitize it all if they wanted, but it's all expensive and they don't want to do it. My wife and I, Chris and I have been kind of on this for my whole career. I didn't start writing music till I was about 30, 29 or 30, just like my dad actually. But I was doing a lot of conducting before and we've been trying to do this preserve this forever because it's a mess because the film studios own all the music, so they've all generally been one-offs. Nobody's ever wanted to perform it again once it's been recorded for the movie.

([16:06](#)):

So it's very hard to find the materials to perform it. And now that everyone does want to perform this music, it's a thing. It's difficult. Like MGM that did all those *Busby Berkeley* musicals and *Wizard of Oz*, they threw it all away in the sixties. They took all the music, all the sheet music scores, they threw everything. They needed the building for something else, and it was housing the music. Well see, we can't even comprehend that now, but this is in the sixties. They put it in a dump under the 405 freeway in Los Angeles, literally. So yeah, imagine what a piece of paper from *Wizard of Oz* would be worth just as ephemera.

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MADDIE ORTON
Oh my God.

DAVID NEWMAN
Just an original page of score or apart from the *Wizard of Oz*.

MADDIE ORTON ([16:50](#)):

That's going to bother me for a long time. I can't believe that

DAVID NEWMAN ([16:56](#)):

Because they're not publishers, even though they are de facto when a film company does a movie and John Williams writes a Spielberg movie, like *ET*, Universal owns that music, not John Williams. But Universal isn't a publisher.

MADDIE ORTON ([17:11](#)):

Is it also historically important to hold onto these scores as well?

DAVID NEWMAN ([17:16](#)):

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Yes, of course. It's profoundly historically important, and I think they're more realizing this now, but still that's not their business. They don't have any incentive to do it.

MADDIE ORTON ([17:29](#)):

So how do you work on the film preservation piece of it? What do you do?

DAVID NEWMAN ([17:33](#)):

Well, you go and you, it's a big treasure hunt... Let's say this, okay, in 2011, we premiered the 1961 *West Side Story* movie with live orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl. Then we did it in New York. I've done it 50 times. Right? Okay. So when they were prepping that they asked MGM, where's the music? They don't have it. Nobody's got it. Nobody has the music. So you know where they found it? They found it in Robert Weiss's Estate, the director. So this is the thing is you start to learn, it's like music, film, music, archeology. Okay, it's not here. Maybe it's here and if it's not here, maybe the editor has a copy or maybe the director has a copy or the director state has a copy, or it was given as a gift to somebody that this person was really friendly with this composer, so maybe they have a copy.

([18:30](#)):

Do you understand what I'm saying? You start to learn the lay of the land and the history of who did what, where, when, and you just start looking for it. But it's not easy and nobody can do it unless you know what you're doing. You can't be in Cincinnati and say, I want to conduct something from *All About Eve*. You can't rent it. You wouldn't even know what to do. Right. The shame of it is some high school student in Poughkeepsie wants to look at a score for blah, blah, blah, forget it. They can't look at it. And so that's so annoying to us.

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MADDIE ORTON ([19:11](#)):

I assume that's important for training the next generation too.

DAVID NEWMAN ([19:14](#)):

And like I was talking about all about Eve, and I'll go and present it to a class of 20 year olds all about, Eve has a very, very complicated exposition. It introduces five or six characters with a voiceover at the beginning, and all this stuff is going on in the music that you need to point it out, but they can only see it when I show it to them. There's no way to look at the music while the film is, it's a problem of materials, and then all you can really do is talk superficially about the film.

MADDIE ORTON ([19:49](#)):

Is part of your interest helping preserve your dad's legacy as well?

DAVID NEWMAN ([19:53](#)):

Yeah, but my dad's legacy is pretty good. Fox, 20th century Fox, is pretty good about keeping their stuff together. Disney was very good. Walt Disney understood the legacy of what he was doing. 20th Century Fox because of my father actually was pretty good. But MGM and Paramount and Warner Brothers is okay. Again, you just have to know what you're doing or know somebody that knows what they're doing.

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MADDIE ORTON ([20:20](#)):

Are there any sort of holy grail scores that you just can't get your hands on that you think should be preserved?

DAVID NEWMAN ([20:25](#)):

I think at this point, even if we can't get our hands on it, we can do what's called a take down. You can listen and write it down. There are people that can do that as well. So it's really just such a massive project and so time intensive and there's not a huge incentive to do it because there's not a lot of money to be made. It's more, like you said, a historical kind of thing for that. The Library of Congress would do the Academy in Los Angeles, they do have a library, but they do have film stuff there. But mostly it's scripts. And they've been great with Spielberg and Scorsese that they've been great with film, restoring film and stuff. So film music's getting better, but it's definitely a problem.

MADDIE ORTON ([21:16](#)):

Do you think in terms of getting that sort of artistic appreciation and recognition that having orchestras like New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performing film scores live is a step towards that?

DAVID NEWMAN ([21:33](#)):

Yeah. First of all, you're convincing the musicians of the artistic nature of it. Nobody's trying to write crappy music. Film's always looked on as crappy, not very good. I guarantee you nobody writing this from the thirties on was trying to do that. They know everything that's going on. They know all the canon, repertoire. They're all really trained in everything. And like I said, it takes a few film. Music has a weird form. It doesn't have a concert music form. It's essentially functional music. It's functioning to be

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in conjunction with a narrative film thing, but it doesn't mean it cannot or is not artistic, but you have to play it. The whole thing. You have to play from the beginning to the end to figure out what are they doing. You can't just play two minutes of it and say, 'Well, that's the music from a film.'

[\(22:31\)](#):

ET starts with a piccolo solo in a star field as it comes down. So what does that mean? Well, maybe by the time you get to the end of the movie, you understand textural choices, orchestration choices, harmonic, all these things that you can do with abstract music. "Abstract music" just means music without a text. It's not abstract because it is functioning to be with a film until you get to the end of whatever the person is writing, you have no way of discussing what it is. So when you do these films all the way through, like you said, *Casablanca*, okay, you decide, okay, you do that, you rehearse it two or three times. You do two or three performances. Okay, now you can talk about it. This has been going on now really since 2010/'11 like gangbusters for every orchestra everywhere. And they start to understand what it is, and then maybe somebody can write about a talk about a champion it. So we're just pleased as can be with the live movie, the film with live orchestra, because then it's not just excerpts. You can hear what they're doing.

MADDIE ORTON [\(23:45\)](#):

David, thank you so much for your time today. This was fascinating and I cannot wait to see *Matilda* Live in concert.

MADDIE ORTON [\(23:53\)](#):

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra will present *Matilda* in concert on Friday, March 22nd at the State Theater. For more information, visit STNJ.org. If you liked this episode, be sure to give us a review,

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This episode was hosted, produced, and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. Special thanks to David Newman. I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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