

## JOHN POWELL (b. 1963)



Photo: Batu Sener

John Powell's father Jim Powell was a tuba player in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Thomas Beecham, and John longed to be a violinist as a child. Realising he wasn't a good enough musician, he decided to become a composer.

Whilst studying at Trinity

College of Music (composition: Richard Arnell, electronic music: Glen Morgan) he met Gavin Greenaway and Michael Petry; joining with them to form the Media Arts Group (MAG). Powell worked as a tape op at Air Studios, and played keyboards in the soul band The Fabulistics while courting his wife, Melinda. After joining the jingle company Air-Edel, Powell composed for numerous commercials and TV shows, sometimes helping out other composers such as Tim Souster, Patrick Doyle and Hans Zimmer.

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s MAG made contemporary classical music that accompanied Petry's art

installations and in 1995 their opera *An Englishman, An Irishman and a Frenchman* (on the lives of Auden, Wilde and Cocteau) had its world première at the National Gallery in Germany with the Bonn Orchestra and Opera.

At Zimmer's suggestion, Powell moved to Los Angeles in 1997 where he started a career scoring 54 feature films including *Shrek*, *The Bourne Identity*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Face/Off*, *Chicken Run*, *Ice Age 2, 3 & 4*, *Happy Feet 1 & 2*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, *The Italian Job*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *United 93*, *Hancock*, *Kung Fu Panda 1 & 2* and *Rio 1 & 2*. His score for *How To Train Your Dragon* earned him his first Academy Award nomination in 2011. He has recently written scores for *How To Train Your Dragon 2* and *Joe Wright's Pan*.

In 2012 MAG made a 25th anniversary sound installation at the Palm Springs Art Museum called *The Dilemma*, which Powell has now reworked for Gospel Choir and Orchestra, and he is currently writing several non-film works.

## A Prussian Requiem

Composed by John Powell to a libretto by Michael Petry

The action takes place the night before the start of the First World War. A month earlier (28 June 1914) Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria, had been shot by Gavrilo Princip a Yugoslav nationalist (a Bosnian Serb) and the assassination was used as a pretext for the many empires of Europe to make plays for yet more power. Kaiser Wilhelm II (a close friend of Ferdinand) was generally seen as a buffoon who liked dressing up in military attire but was not of a real military mind nor discipline. Wilhelm was a cousin of Tsar Nicholas II (Russia) and King George V (Great Britain) who joined forces against him after Wilhelm's attempts at diplomacy were thwarted by his generals all too eager for war despite the human cost.

When the Kaiser was presented with the possibility of peace negotiations (musically throughout the work this is

represented by the repeating rhythms of diplomatic telegrams in morse code; using the word 'peace') it was Prussian General Helmuth von Moltke (The Younger) who refused to alter his battle plans, and the 'Great War' commenced. The work can be seen as a requiem to the consequences of one man's hubris upon the 20th century.



Photo: George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

Whilst Powell eschews the notion that this is actually a 'requiem' in the Classical sense, he structured the work with resonance to the form. The work opens with *An Introduction*, as our main protagonist, Moltke, romantically longs for the glory of sweeping across Europe in a heroic repeat of his uncle's victories (Moltke the Elder). A brief moment of doubt is brushed away as the orchestra and chorus regale us with the twisted skipping *March!*, where the ironic words are but rhythmic devices for celebrating the new century's industrialised warfare.

By part 3, *Beware The Bear*, Moltke is beginning to feel the cost of being at the forefront of his decisions, as the reality of sticking with the 'Schlieffen plan' (fighting on both west and eastern fronts) sinks in. *We, the Glorious Dead*, part 4, begins as the chorus sings a contorted canon (musically based on Powell's interest in the unusual singing style of the 'We Free' churches of North Uist). It aims to be a sonic representation of people's ability to follow each other into the fully expected suffering of war led only by the noble ideals of propaganda. Men sing mournfully of their release from the cannons and the women mechanically butcher the meanings of words to cheerlead the flock.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons | Private Collection - Warenberg Trust

Helmuth von Moltke the Younger

## MICHAEL PETRY (b. 1960)



Michael Petry

Michael Petry is a visual artist, author and curator. Born in Texas, Petry has lived in London since 1981. He co-founded the Museum of Installation, was Guest Curator at the Kunstakademiet, Oslo and Curator of the Royal Academy Schools Gallery.

Petry's books include *Installation Art* for Thames & Hudson (T&H, 1994), *Installation in the New Millennium* (T&H, 2003), *Abstract Eroticism* (1996) and *A Thing of Beauty is...* (1997). *The Trouble with Michael*, a monograph of his practice, was published by Art Media Press (2001). Petry's *Hidden Histories: 20th century male same sex lovers in the visual arts* (2004) was the first comprehensive survey of its kind, and accompanied an exhibition he curated for The

New Art Gallery Walsall. Petry's *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist Artisan Relationship* (T&H, 2011) accompanied an exhibition he curated (touring European museums) as is the case for his current book *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists reinvigorate the Still-Life tradition* (T&H 2013). Petry was the first Artist in Residence at Sir John Soane's Museum (2010/11) and he has just had a one man show *A Twist in Time* at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester. He was in *Frontiers Reimagined*, an official collateral event of the 2015 Venice Biennale and his one man show *The Touch of the Oracle* (Palm Springs Art Museum, 2012) was accompanied by a ten-year career review (T&H). Petry and Powell made a new work for the exhibition *The Dilemma* celebrating 25 years of working together with Gavin Greenaway. Petry is represented by the Fine Art Society (London), Hiram Butler Gallery (Houston), Melissa Morgan Fine Art (Palm Desert) and Sundaram Tagore Gallery (New York).

### A HISTORY OF THUNDER

Michael Petry's latest exhibition *A History of Thunder*, presented to coincide with this performance, is free to

view at the Fine Art Society (148 New Bond Street, London). It comprises his own work together with photographs and paintings from the First and Second World Wars.



German soldiers

Photo: © Michael Petry

By part 5, *Easy*, Moltke uses the *Glorious Dead* melody to luxuriate in his regrets that he couldn't 'lunch in Paris' followed by 'dinner in St Petersburg'. As he continues to complain of interrupted banquets, the chorus returns to lament with him in what is the closest to the *Lacrimosa* section of the Mass.

An excited instrumental beginning to *The Papers of Peace* (again using rhythms of morse code) intones frenetic diplomacy as the Kaiser arrives to tell Moltke the good news. But his enthusiasm is dashed in part 7 *Let the Rails Roll* where the two men verbally battle. Moltke's contempt for peace; 'a mere piece of paper' *crescendos* into part 8, *Victory is Ours*. This is Powell's nod to many famous 'Dies Irae's and the composer brings forth musically the expected violence and force that belies the irony of the words.

The final sections present the dysfunction of the human animal and its constructs. In *My Reasoning* we see an ego

build to its final explosive measure as Moltke cannot keep quiet about his fears of lost glory for himself, but the doubt is clothed in the language of patriotism. The chorus starts singing a hymn of lost innocence in *The Gift*, and we see the opposing forces of vast empires tear apart in the simplicity of this song; a song where the youth of the world offer themselves as a 'libation', a naive gift to 'the gods'.

The wordless ending brings all the combatants back. Powell shows that language can no longer compete with the madness of total war. As their keening moans are overtaken by the choir, these two Prussians fade into history and obscurity, a fitting epitaph. If the work truly is a requiem, it is one for the global victims of these catastrophic actions.

### PROGRAMME NOTES

Vaughan Williams & Elgar © Michael Kennedy | *A Prussian Requiem* © courtesy of MOCA London