hubris
vocal works
by
john powell

the hubris of john powell

Was I attempting to use music to salve my cowardice?

One hundred years after World War I started, I attempted a "war requiem"; an act of grand hubris I thought, and in that very idea, I found my story: "How did the war begin?"

And would I able to be more than a "film composer" and finally communicate to others the complexities of my feelings - on a subject I knew nothing of other than half heard conjecture and overactive empathy? Once I looked at the scenes of muted conflict holding Europe and thus its empires in a constant geopolitical standoff... I found that one man, General Helmut von Moltke, a man with a feeling of historical entitlement could really have been the reason that war went from "inevitable" to a reality. A man with such hubris? Oh, the irony :)

The work was too large for me to start immediately, I needed something else to use as a warm up and as usual Michael Petry came to my rescue. From the recordings of an installation piece written with Gavin Greenaway, I knew I could turn the wonderful voices of Judith, Edie and the other singers into something else; and so formed *The Prize is Still Mine*, a strange mix of styles that I have always liked; gospel and early 20th century romanticism?

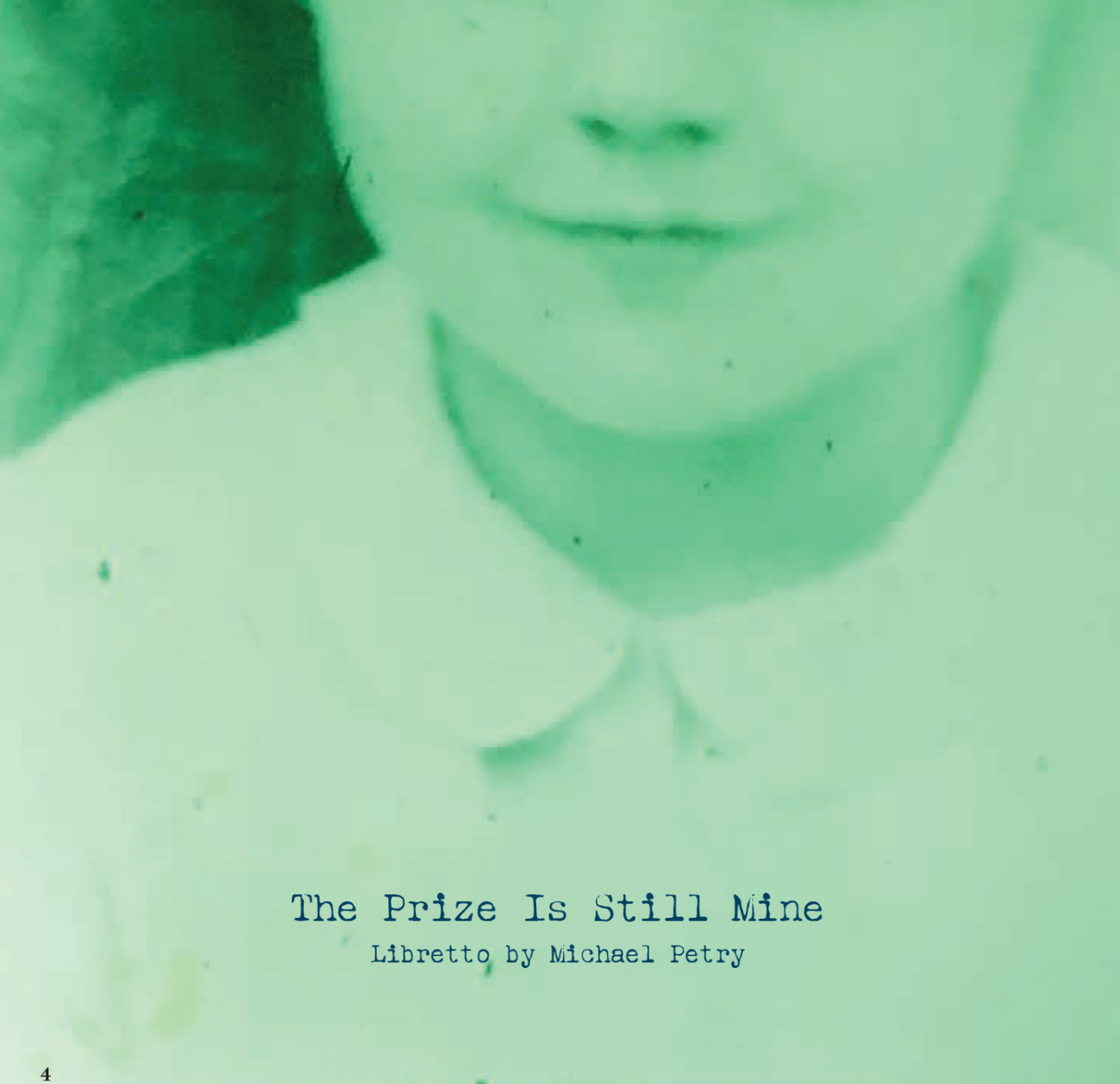
Ok, now for the main course.

Even before the work on *A Prussian Requiem* began, my wife Melinda's health was starting to decline; the main reason I was taking less work in Hollywood. But I never really would have believed what the future held; a chilling admission of the power of optimism in the face of a universe capable of such chaos. The work formed but Melinda began fighting a battle she was destined to lose, again the hubris that gave me utter confidence in perfect outcomes was retrospectively so familiar to the madness that allows conflicts to "be over by Christmas".

And so, a year later, as the sound of *A Prussian Requiem* died at its first performance in the Festival Hall, so did Melinda. I was holding her hand as my phone rang with unheard congratulations from far off London... What had I done? Had my hubris brought forth pain and suffering the way General Von Moltkes had on the last days of August in 1914... Is that how the world works? Obviously, a neurotic human sees all patterns leading back to them: what narcissism can be achieved so easily from the evolutionary functions that led humanity to success, but at times of great sorrow, we can find sharp needles in vague haystacks if it gives us something to stick into our hearts to stop the pain.

And so, the last work I needed to write became obvious. A requiem to a Requiem. Neither *A Prussian Requiem* nor *Requiem Addendum* are truly what they say they are but merely the fumblings of my heart in search of communing to that which I have lost.

John Powell
Los Angeles
5:50am November 25th 2017



The Prize Is Still Mine

Libretto by Michael Petry

Women:
He took it
He took it
He could have it

Should have it
Would have it

Solo:
Would have it, had it
Lord, he took it

Women:
So he took it from me
From mine, from us, for his

Women:
To his, to those
He thought
were selected

Solo:
So he brought the prize
So he took our prize

Women:
I don't care
He didn't have to care

Solo:
He took it, he told me

He told me

Should have it

Solo:
From mine, from ours, for his

Women:
So he got the prize
So he took our prize
So he has our prize
The prize is still mine

Solo:
He told me it was his

Solo:
From mine, from us, for his

Women:
He took it, he told me
He could have it
Should have it
Would have it

So he took it from me

Women:
From mine, from us, for his
To his, to those
He thought
were selected

Solo:
The trumpets

He has the prize

Solo:
He didn't worry
He didn't think
He only followed
His rules
Now he rules

Solo:
He told me

Solo:
For his
He thought
I don't care

Women:
He didn't worry
He didn't think
He only followed the rules
Now he rules me

Women:
He only followed the rules
His rules
Now he rules me

Women:
He didn't worry
He didn't think
He only followed the rules
His rules
Now he rules me

So he got the prize
So he took our prize
So he has our prize
The prize is still mine

I don't care
He didn't have to care
The trumpets

Defeat of mine

Our prize
The prize is still mine

Solo:
The prize is mine

He said

He said

only blow

A Prussian Requiem

At the beginning of the 20th century, the major European countries were aligned in two opposing defensive pacts: the Triple Entente, which combined the military might of France, Russia and Great Britain, and the Triple Alliance, uniting Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. When, in the summer of 1914, the Archduke Ferdinand – heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne – was assassinated in Sarajevo, this action triggered a global conflict. Instead of taking retribution within the confines of empire, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor called upon his German ally, Kaiser Wilhelm II, to support him. Neighbouring Russia chose to intervene in support of the Serbian Slavs, whom the Emperor held responsible for the assassination, causing France and Great Britain to declare war. Reluctant to fight on two fronts, Germany's strategy - carried out by the Kaiser's Chief of the German General Staff, General Helmuth von Moltke - was first to overcome France, crossing through neutral Belgium, and then turn on Russia in the east.

Victoria Schofield

Libretto by Michael Petry

I. Introduction to Moltke

Moltke:

I love Paris in the Spring
But time was wrong
for sunning and sipping the fruit of the Marne
Some said look right
But I looked left as Schlieffen's shadow fell
and the ground opened up.

II. The March

Women:

March,
March onward,
March toward victory
toward glory
away from truth

Men:

Away from truth
toward victory
toward glory

Women:

March,
See the dark sky
At noon
Embrace the dark, the dust
the parts of friends
and the foes that fly past
in a moment as time stands still

Men:

friends as they fly past
foes as they fly past
in a moment as time stands still

Women:

Rose of thorns
made of steel
sound so loud, -- hear it any more

Men:

March
past wire strung
with rose thorns made of steel
towards the sound that is so loud
You cannot hear it any more

Chorus:

A red glare in the sky
A red noise in your head
A red mist in their eyes

March, March
Over the top!

III. Beware the Bear

Moltke:
The bear from the east
swallowed the lovely youth
who fought so hard and so brave,
it was their last ever breath that tears,
hidden tears welled deep
and flowed like the cold waters of France

IV. We the Glorious Dead

Chorus in canon:
We long to be inglorious

Men:
Chain us to your cannons
Women:
We, the beauteous youth
the princes of stone gardens
long to be slaves of the light
Men:
Chain us to your guns
Women:
let us breath the air
be it foul
be it sulphurous
be it dank
Men:
Chained only in mud
Women:
with the smell of blood
blood of our fellows
Men:
Let us breathe deep of that air

V. Easy

Moltke:
We thought we'd be having lunch in Paris
and then we'd dine in St. Petersburg

Chorus:
We long to be inglorious

Moltke:
But the banquet was death's alone
Fields of boys all broken and bloodied
Their life force mixed with mud

Chorus:
A sacrament to life
A libation to Apollo
who rains tears
onto planes of death
as his boys,
his children,
his loves
lies bleeding in muddy fields

Moltke:
A mask of pain
of red and brown,
blueish skin.
white where blackened marks
were washed clean by the rain
And I was left unclean.

VI. The Papers of Peace

The Kaiser:

My friend Ferdinand's death,
that racing bullet need not forge
a revolution,
that quiet projectile need not set on course grander plans
plans, plans within plans,
new lines on old maps
Some say that I'm the impulsive one, reckless one,
the one who wants war.
I only want the German peoples
to have their place at the world's table.
It is my cousin to the west, George,
who'd have me fight my cousin to the east, Nicolas!
at the same time.
But here, I have a paper
I hold the answer to our problem
Moltke, turn right
Turn right
A piece of paper offering victory at no cost!

VII. Let the Rails Roll

Moltke:

But we can't!
A piece of paper, a mere piece of paper
We cannot stop,
only a coward would stop!
Left is right!
Victory!
Let the rails roll!
My men will march,
My plan must proceed!
And I say on to the left!
There is no stopping!

The Kaiser:

But they promised peace
They promised me peace
Stop please!
Bloodshed!
Madness!
Bloodshed!
Turn right!
Madness! Endless!

VIII. Victory is Ours

Chorus:

Ring the bells from every tower
toll loudly our names, the dying sound is our memorial
Clang our fate from the highest peaks,
ring our tales in squares of stone,
Bang on kitchen tables
and beat the panes of smoky windows,
Leave no stone upturned
to mark our passage from this life to the next
Leave no tears, shed no water for poppies,
the flower of eternal sleep
For we rise each day, and each night
as ghostly dreams of sad victories and pass you by
as you walk the streets.
We the glorious dead can only haunt!

And then we die again, when our names recall nothing
and no one remembers our names
and stones carved with memories are forgotten.

IX. My Reasoning

Moltke:

The cock and the bulldog would form a vice
to grind our bones
to feed the bear.
No, there is no fucking stopping!

Chorus:

The wonder of the red mud
It's our land!

Moltke:

No one shall pass
nor step upon our sacred earth
No, there will be no stopping!

X. The Gift

Chorus:
Come, oh mighty Jesus,
Come Mohammed, come,
Come Dionysius,
Come Uncle Sam, come,
Drink deep the gift of the young

Lord, we offer our lives
for our god is on our side

Moltke:
A present, a gift to, a libation unto all the gods

Chorus:
The youth of the world
Those beautiful boys
Come drink of me

Women:
Lord, we offer our lives
[Turkish] tanrı bizim tarafımızda (for our god is on our side)
Lord, we offer our lives
Men:
[German] denn gott ist auf unserer Seite (for our god is on our side)
Women:
Lord, we offer our lives
Men:
[French] car dieu est de notre côté (for our god is on our side)

Moltke and the Kaiser turn their backs to the audience in shame and begin howling the sounds of sorrow

Requiem addendum

Libretto by John Powell
Latin Translation by Charles Anthony Silvestri

Adiuva me!
Ne moriatur dea mea!
Tene eam et sustine;
Effice ei miraculum,
Signum vitae.

Help me,
My goddess must not die!
Hold her and feed her
Bring her a miracle
The miracle (sign) of life.

Sonus est ultimus moriri,
Sic enim pergo loqui
De amore, et omne vitale,
De vita fit meliore
Cum flexu blandiri et forma,
Et fabrica amante,
Fit ex filis vulneratis, intertextis.

The sound is the last to die
So I continue to speak
of love, and of all things life-giving
of a life made better
with curves and contours to caress
and with loving texture
made from wounded threads that intertwine

Et aures ultimum me audient,
Minor est opus earum sanguine
Sic enim loquar
Usque ad terminum,
Ut consoler.

The ears may hear me last
their need for blood is less
and so I shall speak
until the last
in order to bring comfort

Itaque effluat ea,
Ea.
Nos.
Ego.
Credidi diu duraturum esse canticum nobis.

and so she fades
she
we
I
believed our song would last longer

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Jenny Doyne
Luke Strevens

PICCOLO & ALTO FLUTE
Keith Bragg

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PRODUCED BY
John Powell

PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA AND VOICES CONDUCTED BY
José Serebrier

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Javier Camarena

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RECORDED BY
Mike Hatch

MIXED BY
John Traunwieser

MUSIC TRANSCRIPTIONS BY
Batu Sener

ADDITIONAL MUSIC PREPARATION BY
Jill Streather
Ann Barnard
Joann Kane Music Services

ORCHESTRATIONAL CONSULTANCY
Emlyn Singleton

WATFORD COLOSSEUM STAGE RECORDIST
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ARTWORK BY
Michael Petry

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Dan Goldwasser
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MUSICIAN CONTRACTORS AND MANAGERS
FOR *A PRUSSIAN REQUIEM*
Rachel Jones
David Welton

FOR *REQUIEM ADDENDUM*
Claire Long
Meg Davies

FOR *THE PRIZE IS STILL MINE*
Edie Lehmann Boddicker

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
Dan Coleman
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for Oliver Powell

Dedicated to
Melinda Lerner
(1959 - 2016)

1. **The Prize is Still Mine** 14:29
Libretto by Michael Petry

Philharmonia Orchestra
José Serebrier, *conductor*
Los Angeles Gospel Session Singers
Edie Lehmann Boddicker, *conductor*
Judith Hill, *Solo Vocal*

A Prussian Requiem
Libretto by Michael Petry

2. I. *Introduction to Moltke*
II. *The March* 4:51
3. III. *Beware the Bear* 2:07
4. IV. *We, the Glorious Dead*
V. *Easy* 6:27
5. VI. *The Papers of Peace*
VII. *Let the Rails Roll*
VIII. *Victory is Ours* 9:33
6. IX. *My Reasoning* 3:33
7. X. *The Gift* 9:52

Philharmonia Orchestra
Philharmonia Voices
José Serebrier, *conductor*
Javier Camarena, *Tenor*
Steven Pence, *Baritone*

8. **Requiem addendum** 7:26
Libretto by John Powell
Latin Translation by Charles Anthony Silvestri

Eric Whitacre Singers
Eric Whitacre, *conductor*

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