

A Visit to The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder - the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien - the exhibition The Last Day by photographer Helmut Wimmer - György Ligeti's 1960s landmark piece for symphony orchestra Atmosphères recorded by EUYO musicians from their homes during the first 2020 lockdown. What can this be all about? EUYO Secretary General Marshall Marcus explains...

In June 2020, as the global pandemic was continuing to force the closure of theatres, museums and other cultural places, the European Union Youth Orchestra was in the midst of planning a ground-breaking digital project that would **unite the visual and**

performing arts.

We had seen, once the novelty had worn off, that endless pandemic-period videos of orchestras performing music remotely could yield excellent sound results but less often interesting visuals.

Working with our Chief Conductor **Vasily Petrenko**, I wanted to identify a composition that could be recorded remotely but then given a visual treatment that would make it a real **mixed genre art** project, escaping the usual clichéd orchestra performance video. We agreed on **György Ligeti's *Atmosphères***, the iconic large-scale orchestra piece from 1961, since its complete lack of conventional melody and metre, and its focus instead on dense haunting sound textures using Ligeti's famous 'micropolyphonic' style, made it a perfect candidate for pairing sound and image.

Almost immediately, the music suggested the spaces of Vienna's great **Kunsthistorisches Museum** and one of the Museum's most fantastic paintings: ***The Tower of Babel*** by the sixteenth century Flemish artist **Pieter Bruegel the Elder**. Bruegel's exploded narrative technique – rejecting one simple over-arching narrative and instead building his canvases from the grouping together of large numbers of miniature individual



Marshall Marcus

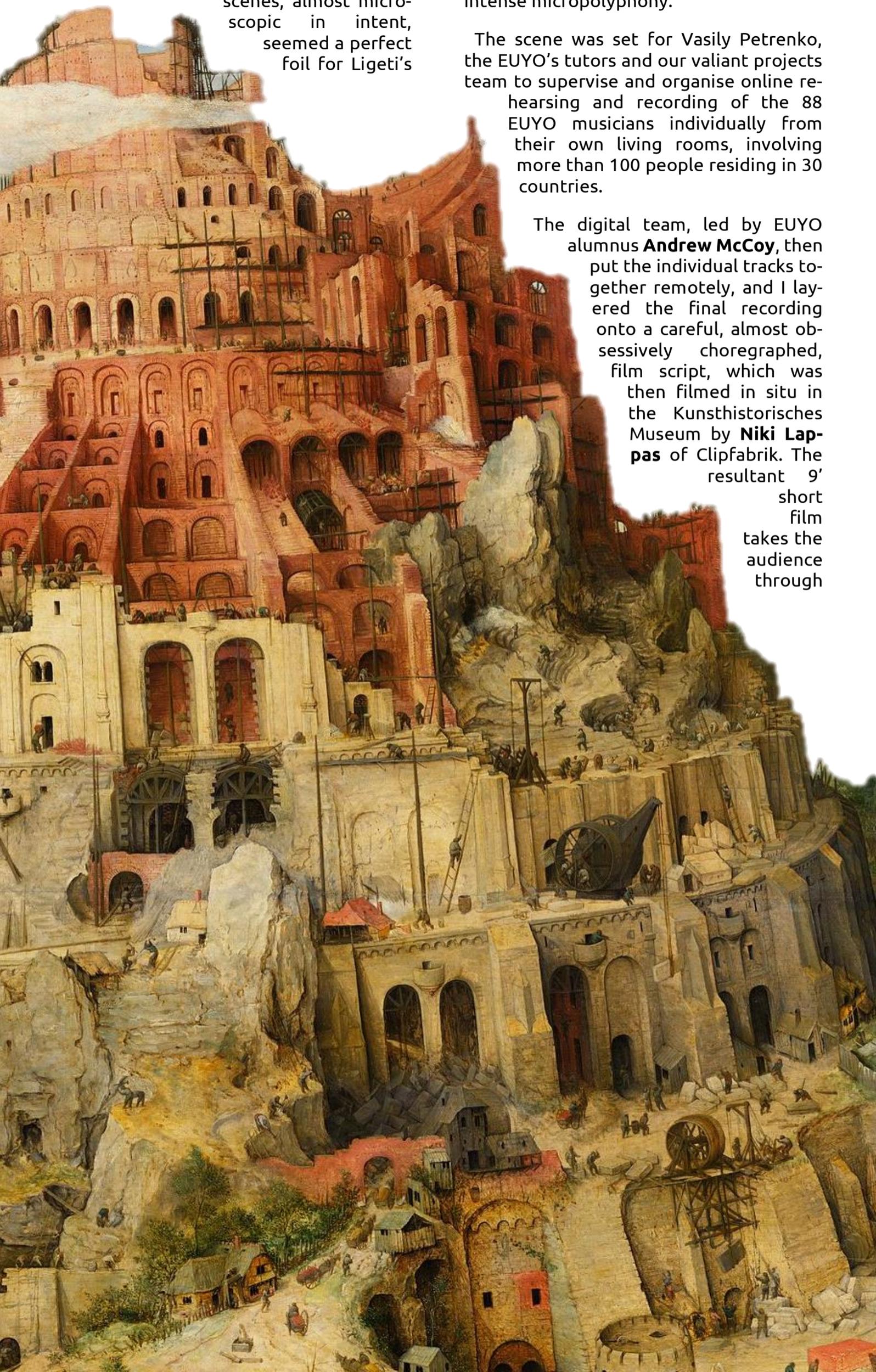
EUYO Secretary General

scenes, almost microscopic in intent, seemed a perfect foil for Ligeti's

intense micropolyphony.

The scene was set for Vasily Petrenko, the EUYO's tutors and our valiant projects team to supervise and organise online rehearsing and recording of the 88 EUYO musicians individually from their own living rooms, involving more than 100 people residing in 30 countries.

The digital team, led by EUYO alumnus **Andrew McCoy**, then put the individual tracks together remotely, and I layered the final recording onto a careful, almost obsessively choreographed, film script, which was then filmed in situ in the Kunsthistorisches Museum by **Niki Lappas** of Clipfabrik. The resultant 9' short film takes the audience through



the Museum’s spaces with Ligeti as our guide: the camera looks, the eye sees, but the music explains.

The myth of the Tower of Babel - the Biblical story in which humanity tries to build as high as heaven, and failing, in the process simply fragments into multiple incomprehensible languages - becomes the pivotal centre of the visual and musical tension.

Wandering through architect **Gottfried Semper’s** Piranesi-like spaces of the Museum’s grand entrance and staircases, the dense fabric of sound shifts through succeeding soundscapes as we move past **Antonio Canova’s** imposing sculpture **The-sus Slaying a Centaur**, past fleeting views of the arch spandrel paintings of **Gustav Klimt, Ernst Klimt** and **Franz Matsch**, the lunette pictures by **Hans Makart** and then the great ceiling painting by **Mihály Munkácsy**, all of these as a prelude to the camera focusing us onto three of Bruegel’s most celebrated canvases: **The Battle Between Carnival and Lent**, **Children’s Games** and then finally, **The Tower of Babel**.

The progress of Ligeti’s music as it transitions into new and bewildering tone colours around two thirds of the way through

the score (at a point that could almost be described as its ‘Golden Interval’) is marked in the film by visual shock.

Images from the Kunsthistorisches Museum’s astonishing exhibition of works by photographer **Helmut Wimmer, The Last Day**. Nature bursts through the museum’s halls, mirroring Ligeti’s deconstructive sounds and Bruegel’s fractured images in a disorientating sequence that brings us back – as if the Tower of Babel were actually an M.C. Escher-like staircase that returns unnoticed back on itself – to the opening shot of the Museum’s entrance.

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We have arrived back where we began. Or have we? Echoes of the chaos caused by the Coronavirus pandemic are reflected in an almost post-apocalyptic scenario in which any sense of plan or human control has finally been shattered by the terrifying power of nature and the incandescent force of the

elements. Ligeti, Bruegel, Wimmer, the pandemic and nature may seem to be speaking in different Babel-like languages, but actually they are all saying the same thing: *‘The Tower of Babel: it already exists. Had you not noticed?’*

Marshall Marcus

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