

# PREMIERE OF THE MONTH

# SHELTER

**G**rappelling with challenging subjects has become something of a trademark for the Canada-based, New Zealand-born composer Juliet Kiri Palmer. The forthcoming world premiere of her latest work, *Shelter*, is no exception. 'I think it's part of who I am,' she explains, 'so it seems natural for me to explore social issues in the work that I create.'

A story about 'a nuclear family adrift in the atomic age', the original inspiration for *Shelter* was a piece of investigative journalism that revealed how the indigenous people that make up Canada's First Nations were paid to mine radioactive minerals on their traditional lands, not knowing these minerals would end up in the atom bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. The miners were not protected from the effects of radiation, and there has since been a lot of illness within these communities, including cancer.

For Palmer, hearing this tale of exploitation fuelled her own lifelong aversion to nuclear power: 'There were three pivotal events that occurred in the mid-1980s, while I was a student in Auckland: the 1985 bombing of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* by the French government, the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, and the signing of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act in 1987. It was very powerful and an amazing historic time to be part of, which shaped who I am.'

On an even more personal note, Palmer adds, 'My father was a fighter pilot in the military. He was a man who loved speed – he loved flying fast, driving fast, skiing fast – so that visceral enjoyment of life has given me an insight into the character of the Pilot, who appears in the opera.'

*Shelter* was originally developed through a series of workshops supported by Tapestry New Opera in Toronto, the co-producer of this month's world premiere with Edmonton Opera. The process began with improvisation around the themes of the work, with text and music added later. Both Palmer and her librettist, Julie Salverson, undertook extensive research into the history of atomic warfare that led up to the Japan bombings, and this in turn has found its way into Palmer's music for the opera.

A quick trawl through Palmer's page on



Juliet Kiri Palmer. Photo by Adam Coish

the Canadian Music Centre website ([www.musiccentre.ca](http://www.musiccentre.ca)) reveals a fluent and versatile stylist, equally at home in accessible tonal idioms as well as modal textures coloured with Messiaen-like harmonies and rhythms. In *Shelter*, this wide-ranging sensibility can be heard in the music for each of the five protagonists. 'I like to ground my stage works in music that relates to the stories of the characters,' she explains, 'and one of the things that I discovered during my research was quite intriguing, namely that when the scientists at Los Alamos were waiting for the right conditions to detonate the first atom bomb, they listened to big band music on the radio. One of the tunes that came on was Duke Ellington's 'I'm Beginning To See The Light', which is pretty ironic when you think about it! So an echo of this underpins the music of the central figures in the opera, Thomas and Claire. They're an allegorical couple who give birth to the atomic age in the form of their daughter called Hope – a very strange child, who glows in the dark.'

In contrast, the character of the Scientist is based on the real life figure of Liese Meitner, a Jewish physicist who worked in Berlin until the rise of Nazism, when she fled to Sweden. 'Meitner is a very interesting and much overlooked figure,' says Palmer. 'It turns out that she loved Brahms *Lieder*, so I had



Keith Klassen plays Pilot in Palmer's *Shelter*. Photo by Harald Benz

great fun sifting through lots of songs to find material that was relevant to her character.'

'At the same time,' Palmer continues, 'a subject like the bombing of Hiroshima calls for a musical language that can carry the necessary kind of intensity and conjure up the imagery of what happened there. For this, the music of Japan has been a strong influence, particularly the sudden interruptions of sound and slow building of tension typical of courtly *gagaku* music, culminating in a post-apocalyptic sensibility inspired by Japanese punk of the 1990s.'

Despite this, says Palmer, audiences may be surprised to find that *Shelter* is also a funny piece: 'I think you can only really get at big subjects through comedy, as it allows you to reach a much messier and darker place than would otherwise be possible. *Shelter* warns us that the beauty of new scientific breakthroughs can sometimes obscure the darker implications of knowledge, because our wisdom hasn't caught up with our curiosity.'

Owen Mortimer

***Shelter* receives its Edmonton Opera world premiere on 15 November as part of the University of Alberta's Festival of Ideas 2012. The co-production with Tapestry New Opera runs until 18 November at Edmonton's La Cité Francophone. [www.edmontonopera.com](http://www.edmontonopera.com)**