

The filming of “4” A production diary by cinematographer Pieter de Vries ACS

Talk about cold weather. It's tough just talking when the temperature dips to minus 28 degrees Celsius. Working with a large video camera when the mercury is barely visible in the thermometer is all the more challenging. Take your gloves off for any longer than 30 seconds and your concentration seems to go south as you have thoughts of frostbitten fingers and horror stories about digits dropping off into the snow. It's not easy to be a creative person in this climate.

Having said that, I was happy with the performance of the Sony HDW-750P High Def camera in these freezing conditions during a recent trip to Lapland. The cold seem to have little effect on it's operation. I remember shooting in Siberia years ago for week after week and my Arri Super 16 camera have awful problems getting started in the morning. All the more surprising as I try not to use a cover on the camera. I don't enjoy working with a cover on a camera - they seem to make the camera feel twice as wide, not to forget the all those pockets filled with all kinds of fold out plastic stuff that just seem to make the camera feel even more cumbersome. I know I should. I know that this kind of protection can add \$\$\$\$ to resale value, but I just don't want to be uncomfortable when I'm using a camera, and that's most of the time. That thing about the camera being an extension of yourself is true. So, scratches and worn paint – here we go.

With this attitude, it's no surprise that I was reluctant to use the Porta-Brace Polar Bear cold weather camera cover packed for this trip. It does keep the camera toasty, but it should – it's huge! It's beautifully crafted; it's just a shame that I can't actually do much when it's fitted on the camera.

As I had done this time last year, I'd engaged a Finnish crew; in fact the same wonderful guys who worked with me exactly twelve months ago during our first trip up here for production “Four”. My assistant Retu Liikanen had arranged to meet us in Kittila up in the far north of the country.

After landing at Kittila's tiny snow bound airport, 200 kilometers above the Artic Circle, I was first one off the plane to do a shot of our musicians leaving the aircraft (Oh, and the plug for Finair). As I rushed inside the terminal to grab a few more shots, I was met by Retu. He was waiting at the door like a coiled spring with hair dryer in hand ready to plug into the nearest outlet. Not to fix hair, but to warm up the lenses to enable shooting inside the terminal as I had forewarned him by email before I left. He knows my dislike of camera covers! Moving straight inside from a freezing exterior in this manner, causes cameras to immediately start oozing water as the warm heated air hits the cold lens and condensation kicks in.

This is what I'm doing way up here according to the blurb: “In four corners of the globe, on four days throughout the year, four outstanding violinists take an journey through their four distinct homelands. From the springtime blossoms of

Japan, into the blistering heat and thunderstorms of an Australian summer; from a joyful autumn in New York, to the unforgiving cold and human warmth of a Finnish winter.”

It's all about Antonio Vivaldi's The Four Seasons Symphony. This is the Winter bit and it's one of the nicest, more stimulating assignments I've had for a while. Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto, one of Europe's finest musicians is up here just for us, along with twelve other musicians. It's a further two hour drive to the location allowing for a check-in at our lakeside (also frozen) log cabins on the way. Our concert was filmed in the log cabin style home of Journalist Yakko, who lives here with his family by a (now) frozen lake set among the (now) snow laden pine trees in one of the remotest part of Finland.

The concert took place for an audience made up of neighbours and locals including the friendly local mayoress who treated our team to a traditional (think: Reindeer for every course) dinner last year during our first shoot in this part of the world. Those who arrived in the early evening came by sled or motorized snow mobile and the odd car. Only thirty of them, children, grannies and local journalists nestled into the open lounge room on a bitterly cold night. The charming ambience was made up of the warm colours of log lined walls, an open fire and exquisite and expensive instruments playing Vivaldi's winter concerto – played as I've never heard it.

Jobs just don't get much better than this. Next week it's our turn to do the Springtime Concerto – in Japan

For anyone who's interested, this is the list of gear that I took from Sydney to use on this shoot.

HDW-750P (25p/50i) with HJ 22X HD lens

Batteries & charger.

Mattbox, rails, support, wide hood & flag.

12V supply.

HD11 x 4.7 W/A HD lens.

Sony 9" Monitor

Sony HVR-Z1P backup camera

Canon FD300 f2.8 lens

Miller fluid head Arrow HD

Miller fluid head DS-10

Miller Solo ENG tripod

Miller Solo VJ tripod

Lowel Tota light

Lowel Tota light

Lowel Caselight

Lowel Caselight

Dedolight Light 400D

Ballast & accessories DEB400D
Dedolight lighting kit 4 lamps, transformer, cables,
Light Panels LED battery eye-light
Manfrotto magic arm kit
Panasonic LCD 16:9 Monitor/soft case TC-7WMS1
Tape, air cans, fuses & small batteries
Electric cables and lighting accessories
Lamp globes
Connectors, tape, air cans fuses & small batteries
Multi-meter & filter rings
Various camera filters
Collapsible reflectors & lighting accessories
Dolly & track sections & track mats X 12

Japan

Winter has morphed into Spring in the northern hemisphere and I've just returned from a two week shoot in Tokyo for the continuation of the documentary "Four". You might recall from my previous Finland posting, this documentary is centred on Vivaldi's wonderful symphony The Four Seasons. Four countries, Four seasons Four famous violinists.

I arrived at Tokyo's Narita airport, an airport that I've passed through a few times while on my way to various assignments. It was not always a happy place - there were infamous violent demonstrations there during its construction back in the early eighties. Local farmers fought a real war with the government of the day in order to prevent it being built; such was their anger with the prospect of losing all their land to a number of very very long concrete slabs. There were police searches of arriving buses and I remember it well as I leave for Tokyo.

I was relatively light-on with gear this time, bringing just four camera cases with me this time. Tim and Joanna had arrived a few days before and brought the other 13 pieces that make up my lighting kits and grip gear. This was done for reasons called "excess baggage charges", or the art of getting out of paying any to the airline. A fit Japanese man in his sixties called Teruhiko Yashiro (Yashi) who works for Virgin Earth, our facilitation company, met me on the other side. The clearance of my Carnet document with Customs was a fast and relaxed affair. As a little side bar, I'd like to mention something about Carnets.

One of the best tips I can offer you in regards to Carnets is to make sure that you have your document filled out in the right places, signed and dated, BEFORE you hand it over to Customs. In addition to this, write the total value, calculated in the local currency (Yen in this case) at the bottom of the value column. Without fail, every Customs officer I've ever dealt with has not failed to be impressed with this small gesture. A total equipment value calculated in \$AUD is totally useless to a tired officer nearing the end of his or her shift. Younger officers often are not sure

what to do with these formidable documents and are grateful that you've already put in some effort and in so doing, making them look in control. It also gives them the impression that you are a regular business traveler and know what you are doing. In the USA, this is a particularly valuable tip I assure you. Making mention that you are working for The Discovery Channel, shooting a documentary on the last of the almost extinct Western Missouri Marsupial Mouse found only in remote parts of Alabama (strangely) helps too. Never met any American who says they don't watch Discovery "all the time".

I've strayed well off topic here. The two and a half hour drive to my apartment in Yotsuya is not enough time to hear all the great stories from Yashi. It turns out that he was a cameraman who worked in Vietnam during the war and in many others since. Turns out too that he knew Neil Davis and other cameramen who worked in Vietnam at that time. This man has seen so much and yet at a busy airport late on a Thursday evening you'd walk right past him not knowing the body work that he did for the American ABC Network, based out of Hong Kong and Tokyo. He works for Virgin Earth as a Production Manager these days and that's why he was there to drive me to Tokyo. It was an interesting drive and a fascinating start to the shoot.

It's all about Hanami, the annual Japanese celebration of the Springtime Cherry Blossoms and these blossoms are in full swing this week. So much so, that tomorrow is going to be full on, catching them on tape before they start to fall. It was actually initially scheduled as a recce/prep day for Tim and myself; Tim Slade is directing this film, as you'll recall.

Hanami is a big deal in Japan. In simple terms to mark this event, you set out a spot under the best bloomin' tree in the park or by the river by arriving really early in the morning, marking out your intended space with a blue tarp. This is a very Japanese thing to do at all public events in my experience. The trick is that you do this before anyone else does. Whole corporations turn up in the evening to sit under the trees to drink Sake and eat great food. My camera is again the Sony HDW-750P a HiDef model plus some unbelievably sharp Canon lenses. Funny, I always shoot with Canon lenses – well not funny, they're just so good optically and mechanically. Moving through the park and watching everyone having so much fun is not too hard. The hardest part is limiting myself to just one small incy wincy shot of Sake that's offered at each treeside party. By the end of this night the trees are looking very nice if not leaning just a little to one side.

Not unlike my recent shoot in Finland, the centerpiece of this shoot was to film an intimate concert with the finest violinist in the country, this time performed in a traditional Japanese Tea House and featuring Japanese solo violinist Sayaka Shoji who performed the Spring Concerto from the Four Seasons work with a twelve-piece ensemble – the same instrument line up that we used in Finland last month. The soundtrack was sent to hard drives by a very talented Japanese

classical music-recording engineer and delivered via a Mac computer with microphone placements set for Dolby 5.1.

I chose to light this beautiful space with 12v Dedo lights. I used eight all up (100 & 150W), enough to just cover the members of the orchestra in small pools of warm light. Set at various fixed dimming levels, the Dedos make the light and shade thing interesting. A Dedolight 400watt HMI covered several rice paper screens in other parts of the room and my two Lowel Fluorescent CaseLites easily did the task of lighting the Cherry trees seen outside at night. Various Lowel Tota lights bounced off the walls and into the Tatami mats to give a nice warm effect. This was all the electricity available. Japan runs on 100 volts, which is different from anywhere else in the world; not unlike the mobile phone system which too, is one of a kind.

Covering music performances is always tricky. The way that I approached this concert was to take full advantage of the fact that it was totally in our control along with a patient audience of fifty. The multiple-take approach. This is how it ran.

Take 1. Shot wide from one side around 45 degrees with the camera rolling on a six metre dolly track. Moving back and forwards along the track with slow movements. This served as a Master shot - a shot that you can reliably always fall back on.

Take 2. The same track position, however this time shooting on the long end of the lens with an emphasis on Sayaka's performance only. Slow glides along the track on the long end of the lens offer some amazing perspective changes and also tend to wipe past the backs of other musicians giving a real sense of depth. This depth is so needed in HiDef cinematography. Focus is critical here in HD. For every centimeter of movement towards the subject on the track it requires a minute focus correction so it can be a bit hairy. This on-the-fly follow-focus technique takes practice but when it works it is dynamic cinematography. You just have to get used to seeing a few focus tweaks here and there.

Take 3. Same track, this time focusing on close ups other players in the orchestra, and ignoring Sayaka's performance (hard to do!). It's nice to wipe past here in the foreground, and this is the magic of long lens shooting on a track.

Take 4. A new and totally different camera angle. This was a wide shot that feels different and fresh from the other takes which have all been from the same side of the "stage". A centre position works well here as to not confuse with crossing the line, however music pieces seem to work no matter where you put the camera I find.

Take 5. Shooting the audience with the orchestra as the foreground. Again long lensing it put the orchestra out of focus taking the eye straight to the people enjoying the music.

The remainder of my time in Japan was taken up filming the landscape round Mount Fuji and the beauty of small things. At this time of the year it's not a huge ask. The blending of beautiful music with landscapes is hard to go past. We even shot a sequence at the Tokyo fish markets. I had to get out of bed at 2.30am to do this but running into Tom Hanks, there for the premiere of The Da Vinci Code, seemed to make it worth the effort!

Autumn

"4" The Four Seasons - Autumn

Da

News Summary:

Production diary during Piet's New York shoot of 4.

News Content:

The voyage through the seasons has continued and I've returned from another stint of shooting, this time in New York. It's the backdrop for the Autumn movement of Vivaldi's The Four Seasons and the violinist featured is Cho-Liang Lin, know to almost everyone who knows him as Jimmy Lin. He is one of the finest soloist in the US and it's amazing that we had him for two weeks.

Two weeks is a generous shooting schedule for a twenty minute cut and what a great place to live and work. It's my second trip there this year, however I've had many trips to New York and this one takes the count to twelve. I do know this city well but you could be excused for thinking that it's my first visit based on the number of times that I stride off in the opposite direction with all the confidence of a Kramer. It's a trademark, this lack of direction, one that Tim and Joanna have come to know well in the past eighteen months or so of working with me on this production. Not having the WTC as a visual reference makes it tricky for a lot of visitors now I believe.

Each of the parts making up this hour long documentary share a similar flow consisting of a number of elements. Landscape shots to evoke the mood of the season. This is not too hard to achieve as I've noticed from the results of my two

trips to Finland and to Tokyo earlier this year. Secondly, a master interview that forms the thread of the story. For these interviews, I've invested some time in deciding where I'd like to shoot them. The idea is to always attempt to include something of the prevailing season in the framing to elicit somewhat of a feel as to where we are. Backgrounds to these interviews are important as they give the audience visual hints about the location. So far so good. Other elements of the shoot comprise trees, and the faces of the people who live there. Finally, a concert performance of the relevant movement (in this case, Autumn) is the musical centerpiece and the part that I find the most demanding to cover as a cinematographer.

It took us a long time to settle on a location for the performance. We had to accommodate Cho-Liang Lin, 15 other musicians, a large audio recording crew and the venue had to reflect the New York vibe and have good enough acoustics to handle a full studio recording session. This has been the case for all the performances so far in the project. The art gallery in the Chelsea area in downtown NY was the venue chosen and it was secured only late Friday afternoon for the Sunday recording session. This session incidentally was produced by Steven Epstein, a (4 time) Grammy Award winner for best classical recordings while working for the likes of the Sony Classical label.

My approach for all the concerts so far has been to cover them with a single HD camera (Sony HDW-750P) shooting at 25p. The ensemble was asked to do the performance five times to allow me to shoot multiple camera angles. Many takes were recorded with the camera mounted on a Wally Dolly. The performance space was a tangle of lighting and audio cables and the odd audience member. The lights that I used for this setup were:

- 2 X Lowel 4 X 2' Caselights
- 8 X Dedolights as back lights
- 1 Lowel DP as a back light
- 2 X Lowel Totas bouncing into the floor
- 1 X Dedo 400D HMI light background light

The seasons have been on the ball time-wise so far on the previous shoots, but Autumn sort of messed us around somewhat. Basically it forgot to come on cue.

Central Park was more like a summer night with its thick green canopy of leaves. A trip upstate New York sorted this problem. There, Fall had already arrived. I filmed every tree I could find that was remotely autumnal.

Another key sequence in the shoot was the lunch at Barney Greengrass 'The Sturgeon King'. This time warp deli located at 541 Amsterdam Avenue at 86th Street is a icon in NY city. Since 1908 it's been famous for its sturgeon. A species of fish; I dined on nothing but sturgeon for 10 weeks while shooting in the Russia years ago and I'll never go near it again. It was a fitting place for Jimmy and eight of his NY based musician friends to meet for lunch. There were some great stories recalled over lunch by some of the most well known classical musicians in the world. Serious Jewish humour under green fluorescent light.

Thanks to my New York crew, Sean, Toshiro, Brad and Doris and of course fellow Aussies, Tim Slade my Director and Joanna Buggy my Producer.

I travelled home alone with my twenty cases in tow and as it always the case at Sydney International Airport, received no assistance from the airline (Qantas) in hauling my 260 kilos of baggage through Customs and out of the place. (it's a cost thing they tell me - don't ya just love privatisation'). I did however manage to find a large-ish trolley with a busted wheel. I've received better service in Bolivia. Next month I'll be shooting the final Summer Installment of '4' at home, here in Australia. We start on the Ghan in Adelaide and somehow end up on Thursday Island. I'll fill in the gaps when I return.

Summer

"4" The Four Seasons - Summer

Da

News Summary:

Production diary during Piet's Australian shoot of 4.

News Content:

I have finished my work the documentary '4'. The production finish in November after a long journey through the centre of Australia and to the north as far as it's possible to go.

Our fourth and final violinist was Australian, Niki Vasilakis, and her contribution to '4' the Summer movement, completed this production in style. The summer element of the film consisted of a journey which started on the rugged southern coast of South Australia and finished in tropical lushness on Thursday Island, a dot in the Torres Strait (pop. 4000) located just off the tip of Cape York Peninsula. The purpose of the journey was for Niki to make her way to the far north to join fourteen other musicians from around the country and perform The Four Seasons (Summer) for the island's community ' a treat for people who don't see the likes of this very often.

We started the journey with a scene of Niki looking out over the great southern ocean. The Sony HDW-750P HD camera was mounted on a jib arm set high among the rocks, looking out over the ocean. It swept down over rocks to reveal her standing at the water's edge. As she turned and walked away her journey starts.

Later that afternoon back in Adelaide, we loaded our camera equipment on The Ghan. This special train famously traverses this huge country from north to south (and back) and is an icon of Australian outback travel for visitors from around the world. Our producer Joanna Buggy had booked an entire carriage for our overnight trip to the Central Australian town of Alice Springs.

It's an eighteen hour hike directly north to Alice and there is no doubt that you'll get a feel for the size of this country on the way. I shot several sequences of Niki on the train mostly of her preparing for the coming week of rehearsal and performances of the Summer movement of Vivaldi's' The Four Seasons.

Tim arranged for me to spend some time in the engine compartment with the drivers and an hour and a half down the track from Alice, the train lurched to a stop in the heat of late morning to allowing us to scramble up into the drivers compartment. While we were there, my assistant Alex Morrison was preparing to move the jib arm and ballast weights to the rear carriage to set-up a shot with my Sony Z1. The idea here was to show the length of the train; an interesting view with the camera mounted on the end of the jib arm extended a few feet out of the last window of the last carriage. His images were impressive. The red of the Australian desert is best photographed in the early morning light and this filled

most of the frame leaving the side of the train just snaking down the far right. One of the most important things to remember when recording shots like this is to ensure that the horizon is level. It's so disappointing when you have perfect in the can but the camera wasn't straight on the tripod head. A nice dense exposure here made it look amazing.

A few early morning sunrise sequences shot in and around Alice Springs and then a four hour flight to Darwin, Australia's most northern city. Here we shot a number of interviews and caught up with other musicians before flying via Cairns to Thursday Island. The airport is actually situated on Horne Island and it's just a twenty minute boat ride to TI as it's called up that way.

A lot of room swapping and luggage shuffling as took place after our arrival there in the late afternoon. There were now more than twenty of us and it was booked to the hilt as a busy weekend was in store on the island.

Most of my focus the following day was directed at getting the concert sorted out in addition to the other shooting that had to be done. The venue was the Cultural Centre located by the water and there were a more that just a few things to attend to there in regards to lighting and positioning of lighting given that we would have a large audience on Saturday evening for the performance. I'd brought with me almost every bit of lighting kit that I had and its long journey here was about to be justified. I touched base with the local electrician to check on power and fuses and took his after hours number in case I took out every fuse on the night of the concert.

I rigged a group of compact Dedolights lights. I attached eight of them to a pole consisting of magic arms suspended down from a beam in the roof, at the centre point of the orchestra's performing position. The musicians would be performing in the typical horseshoe configuration and this lighting position was a good way of ensuring that all the players were covered and that the lights themselves were out of the way of the camera's view as well as easy on the eye for the audience. Setting lights high and centred is an easy way to make a pool of light and it works well for a number of reasons.

1. I was able to set each Dedo to direct a pool of light covering two players and

then squeeze in the top barn door to take the spill off the wall

2. The players were now lit evenly as they were the same distance from each light source

3. The high and central angle puts shape into the face. The fingers of the players as they work around the finger boards of the violins, violas and Cellos (Celli') are nicely back lit when you move around and shoot from a position behind the player.

Flouro banks placed on the floor gave some appealing outlines on the backs of the musicians and the two Tota-lites covering the back wall lifted the scene out of the dark timber. Having these running through dimmers help get the right balance on the night

As was the case for the other three shoots for this documentary, I covered the same movement five times, each take from a different camera position. It's not a simple request to ask an ensemble of world class musicians to play the same fifteen minute section of music five times in a row, especially in front of an audience, however this was always pointed out to the invited audience and there was an understanding that this was the way it had to be done. Regardless, I bet the odd person was wondering if I'd had got it wrong and I just had to keep shooting till I got it right!

It was a hot humid evening and the shooting went really well. The humidity made it tough for the musicians, especially with the tuning of the delicate instruments. The harpsichord had been flown in from Sydney and was in very perfect condition considering its long journey by air and sea. It's more than I could have said for myself. It's a steamy part of Australia and I had a solid week packed with shooting video, shooting stills and more than the odd stint of travelling, covering the country from it's southern to northern tips.

There was one short pickup shot to be filmed at Palm Beach here in Sydney, just ten minutes from my home and that topped it all off. I shot the last frame of the just down the road and found that funny after travelling to so many far off places in the world.

'4' will be screened internationally but keep your eye out for it on SBS Television later this year.

Thanks go to so many people who arrange to have me in places where I could do my best as a cinematographer. Work like this is as good as it gets but in particular:

Producer, Joanna Buggy

Director, Tim Slade

Camera assistant/2nd unit photography and jib technician, Alex (the teacher) Morrison

Sound recordist and teller of the stories, Predrag Malesev

Editor, Lindi Harrison-

Associate Producer and wise young man, Don Featherstone

Sound Post supervisor, Michael (greenman) Gissing

And to all those who assisted us when we worked in Finland, Japan, New York and Australia'thanks