

Peak Performance



JOHANNES AITZETMÜLLER

Music videos have a track record of pushing the boundaries in terms of imagery and effects – but they don't that often stray into the realms of putting the musicians and camera crew through extreme physical challenges as well. To call **Manu Delago's** *Parasol Peak* a 'music video' is a complete understatement though. When Zerb guest editor **Rob Emmanuel** attended a screening of this 'arthouse' recording of a seven-musician processional performance, captured entirely during a tough climb up to the peak of a snow-laden Tyrolean mountain, he was blown away by the synthesis of the melodious, mesmeric music and beauty of the powerful scenery, which acts as a backdrop and at times participant in the soundtrack. He was intrigued to find out how and why this extraordinary project, which features seven musical 'chapters', each named after and set in a uniquely atmospheric setting on the way up the mountain, had been conceived and executed. He spoke to Manu himself, co-director **Johannes Aitzetmüller**, and cameraman **Markus Zimmermann**.

The opening pre-title sequence of *Parasol Peak* (www.parasolpeak.co.uk) is quite the tease. A caption states: 'All music recorded live', and there follows an intriguing montage of out-of-focus, off-framed figures fashioning a soundtrack with random makeshift 'instruments' such as rocks, helmets and carabiners. The climbers may be in their natural Alpine habitat, but the cello and trombone...? Yes, indeed, for Manu Delago offers his own Julie Andrews' proposition as to what 'The hills are alive with'... and, in this case, it's 'the sound of musical mountaineers'.

For all those cultural references, *Parasol Peak* is a joyous adventure like no other. It documents (in both images and music) the processional journey of seven musicians as they wend their way up to the 3003m Rinnenspitze peak, stopping off en route to perform Manu's seven beautiful pieces, each one of which reflects the unique character of the locale in which it is staged. It may be, as Manu says, "the simplest of stories", but how this journey was filmed was far from simple.

Conception

Back in late 2013, film-maker Johannes Aitzetmüller had enlisted fellow extreme sports cameraman Markus Zimmermann to help redefine the 'free-ski movie' genre prevalent within their vibrant skiing community in the Alps around Innsbruck. Tired of the inherently macho "no story – just harder, higher, faster, more jumps and guys with big balls" rut, Johannes wanted to take the genre off-piste. So, over 3 years, they crafted *Heimtschnee* [Home Snow], a home-grown fiction with depth and heart.

Key

1. Manu
2. Cello
3. Flute
4. Perc1
5. Perc2
6. Trumpet
7. Posaune

Manu (with Hang drum on his back) and Sound Recording Engineer Michael Reisigl recce the twin peaks that will be the location for the film's fourth movement, 'Ridge View' – the numbers show the musicians' performing positions

Johannes dared to ask Austrian-born, London-based Manu Delago (an internationally renowned composer-musician and Björk's go-to tour drummer) if he would consider composing a bespoke, authentically Austrian soundtrack – for free. It struck a chord with Manu and he generously agreed, in return for Johannes' involvement in his next project, the video for *Freeze* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ7L3lyuZ1w). Featuring Manu at the top of a mountain (with huge mirrors) playing his signature hang drums (or Hang), *Freeze* caught the attention of Red Bull and, as a result, hit 1 million online views within 3 days. Whilst this had brought together Manu's two passions for music and mountains, he wanted to further explore artistically what being in the mountains really means. Bringing Johannes together with Brighton-based Jeb Hardwick (who had created a hauntingly beautiful animation for Manu's 'A Step'), the concept for *Parasol Peak* was born. Jeb would co-direct with Johannes, then finesse the rough cut, working his magic in the grade and post-production.

Between January and August 2017, Manu drew musical inspiration whilst scouting Alpine locations and recruiting his very own von Trapp ensemble to climb every mountain – with their instruments strapped to their backs. They'd need the skills for long technical mountain climbs but also the stamina to perform the music in situ, often for numerous repeat takes. Somehow, he found six bold and brave musicians who could indeed go 'so long, (and) fare well'!



The band peer over Manu, Johannes and Jeb's shoulders to view playback of the tracking one-shot as Markus tweaks his Ronin setup

viewfinder loupe, with a Canon 24–70mm f2.8, which works well for him when directing as well as shooting.

Meanwhile, Markus' kit comprised: a Vocas shoulder rig, Chroziel matte box on 15mm rods with Tiffen ND filters to supplement the FS7's internal NDs and, for monitoring, the Zacuto FS7 Z-Finder to replace the bulkier original viewfinder unit. He finds this setup perfect for handheld work, especially when rope climbing with only one spare hand. Markus is a huge fan of his Xeen Cine Prime lenses, particularly the 24mm f1.5 ("You can do everything on the 24, I love it!"), plus a 50mm f1.5 and Sigma 70–200mm f2.8.

Again, mindful of size, neither opted for the V-lock route, both running on the FS7 batteries which, with no power-hungry peripherals attached, last for many hours, meaning four each were plenty. Rounding off the kit list were Markus' Sony a6300 and FS700, Johannes' Sony a7Sii and a Panasonic GH4 (for timelapses), all carried in their trusted F-Stop Shinn 80-litre backpacks plus Markus' Manfrotto Aviator rucksack for his DJI Phantom 4 kit. For media management, they had four 64GB cards each, so whilst their shooting efficiency was good, with 30 minutes of 4K footage from the FS7 filling a card, they had to transfer data (with double backups) whenever they returned to the cabin to ensure they had a full complement of cards ready for the next location.

High-altitude drone shots

Markus is highly proficient at flying drones in mountains, having done it regularly, predominantly through the winter. Reading and reacting swiftly to the rapid changes in weather conditions is key, particularly as high winds and drones



Markus' DJI Phantom on top of the world – despite the sunshine here, it spent much of its time battling snow and fog



Co-director/C camera Jeb Hardwick in position as Johannes prepares the musicians for a take in 'Parasol Woods'

Funds, crew and kit

As co-producer, co-director and B camera operator, Johannes started to plan the shoot. Through tireless efforts, they had managed to accrue funds for the whole film production budget, which included an Austrian state grant, various sums from Tyrol, Red Bull, and a top-up from Manu himself, as well as sponsorship providing outdoor clothing for the musicians and even meat from a local butcher to help feed the team! At a bit under €20,000, it was a modest budget but workable.

Johannes also set about sourcing the crew and kit. As Markus is a licensed drone operator, he would be A-camera/drone op. Having worked together on many tight-schedule projects, Johannes and Markus already knew how each other functions under pressure, plus both being Sony FS7 owners would help keep costs down. It also meant they had 3 years' worth of absolute confidence in the bulletproof reliability of their workhorses. They'd each been through the most inhospitable conditions, from –55° Siberian and Antarctic snowstorms, torrential downpours in the Scottish Highlands, to the dusty, baking heat of Pakistan and they knew that: "Every time you turn it on, it just works."

Both had honed their kits to the ideal setup for them. Johannes favoured the stripped-down FS7 body without the

don't mix (the Phantom's high-wind warning and Return to Home features can be invaluable). The way the Phantom 4 takes high-altitude conditions in its stride, including rain and freezing temperatures, has impressed Markus. He has even inadvertently flown through freezing fog and heavy snowstorms, with gimbal and flight performance totally unaffected despite discovering a few millimetres of ice on the rotors. As long as the batteries are kept warm against his body until needed, he still gets a full 15 minutes' flight time in all conditions, so with good planning of flights and shots, his three batteries saw them through the longest of days.

As the area they needed to fly over was strictly protected and restricted, Johannes communicated with the authorities early on, politely explaining clear details of their requirements. When he then had to inform them he would regretfully have to relocate as €1500 per day would wipe out the budget, his patience was rewarded by their waiving the €9000 fee and granting full permission. This was yet another major hurdle cleared, as the drone shots would be key in revealing the scale and beauty of the landscape within which this human endeavour was to occur and, more crucially, the higher they went, the more they would rely on the drone angles for coverage that would otherwise be unobtainable.

Codecs

Parasol Peak would be delivered in full HD, although it was shot in 4K 25p, keeping mostly to the Sony cameras, as their same colour science would help in matching. The FS7s, a6300 and a7Sii were all set to 4K S-Log 3 Cine with 1/50th/180° shutter; the FS700 had to go with full HD setting. Markus knows that drone and FS7 footage can match pretty well, if the Phantom is set to 3840x2160 4K for its higher bit-rate



Markus' trusted FS7 configuration with Vocas shoulder rig and Zacuto Z-Finder; although it has the Xeen Cine 50mm on here, the 24mm was used more often

than the full 4K, whilst D-Log gives full dynamic range for grading. With D-Log's fixed ISO500, ND filters are a must in snowy conditions, but as there wasn't much sun on this shoot, he managed with ND8 and ND16. With S-Log 3's ISO fixed at 2000, the FS7s' internal ND filters were invaluable. It ended up being essentially a two-camera shoot on the FS7s plus drone, with members of the crew operating the other cameras when needed. This included Johannes' intern Lena Maria, whose eager enthusiasm to learn everything about filming proved to be a mutual benefit on the project.



Michael had to get to some hard-to-reach positions for his innovative and bespoke 'off-the-wall' solutions for rigging microphones

Audio

Sound Engineer Michael Reislgl's monumental achievements are worthy of an article of its own, but it would be remiss to make no mention here. High praise is due for his innovative solutions and the superlative audio coverage and clarity that resulted. To provide Manu's dream of a truly immersive film, Michael placed a stereo pair at each location purely to capture ambience to feed into the final mix for a more natural aural experience (along with mics for each musician). After the first day, he was assigned a couple of assistants, but nevertheless he must have personally climbed the whole peak roughly two times over, traversing up and down, often 50 to 100m, to and from his mixer after tweaking mics and constant troubleshooting. His expertise meant that no post redubbing whatsoever was required and his recording was perfect album quality – quite some feat in the circumstances.

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“ Johannes and Manu had set out all the musicians' positions, working out camera angles and noting them down in drawings and reference photos.

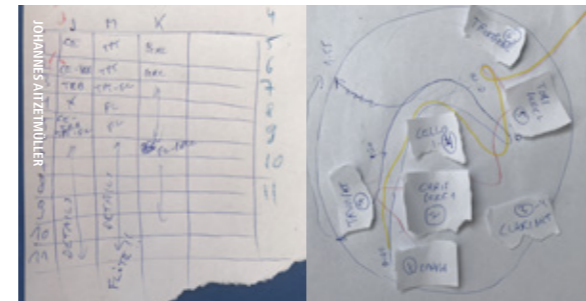


Manu does his best 'air cello' impression for Johannes to plan positions and shots on the via ferrata for 'North Cluster'

For once, the camera department was too busy for the old 'waiting for sound' gag as they used to good advantage any delays to grab cutaways, B-roll and plenty of timelapses, of which there couldn't be too many. Consequently, most of the timelapses were done on the FS7s, on their lowest frame rate of 1fps. As tripods are an unwanted hindrance when climbing, every bag, crack or rock that could hold a camera steady was employed.

A good time of year?

September 2017 was chosen for the shoot, as the summer weather would mean the best conditions for the musicians' performance, allow the crew to record in relative ease, and ensure the hiking and climbing would be achievable by all. On a recce just weeks earlier, at 20°, the T-shirt weather was looking good – that is, until it took a dramatically unseasonal turn for the worse, dumping a metre of snow all over the area and placing the whole project in doubt. Would it be safe and was everyone capable of snow climbing? Would the locations still be accessible and, if so, would it be possible to perform and record? Johannes' experience of documentaries in extreme locations has taught him that, whilst preparation and precise planning are crucial to success, you can only ever plan with 50–70% certainty; the rest will invariably have to evolve flexibly during the shoot. As producer, whilst he knew his crew's capabilities, he didn't know about the musicians' and therefore wondered whether it should be aborted. Manu reassured him that they were absolutely capable and, as this was the only time-window when everyone was available, it had to go ahead. They'd make continual assessments and work out Plan Bs as necessary.



Left: Johannes' planning drawings for 'North Cluster' with Johannes', Markus' and Klemens' shot lists; (right) Mapping the path and timings for Ronin tracking shots in the forest

Meticulous planning

As if reflecting the film's upwards progress in altitude and ruggedness, Day 1 eased them in with a mild-weathered afternoon spent in the relative comfort of the forest setting of the first section, 'Parasol Woods'. Markus might beg to differ: the film proper starts with a punishingly precise 1m 50s tracking shot timed perfectly to introduce each musician as their part begins. With another long one-shot take later in this section too, this was no mean feat for Markus on his Ronin and Easyrig. It was a good early example of the coming together of the great skills, meticulous planning and tireless teamwork on which the success of *Parasol Peak* would depend.

As the only people who had recce'd all the locations, Johannes and Manu had defined all the musicians' positions, working out camera angles and noting them down in drawings and reference photos. They then spent long hours studiously listening to Manu's demo recordings with the drawings in front of them, thoroughly familiarising themselves with every phrase and planning the key moments requiring specific coverage. These detailed plans (along with continual communication and coordination throughout the shoot) would prove invaluable when their physical and mental endurance were being taxed to the max, resulting in not a single shot being missed.

For the forest tracking shots, for instance, they had mapped out each path with coloured arrows, noting the exact timing



Manu 'Hangs out' while Michael sets audio levels for the instruments

of when each instrument would come in. Unsurprisingly, the reality turned out to be an uneven path of tree roots, rocks and gaps between trees narrower than the camera rig – and no time to rehearse! To complicate things further, the wireless transmitter's 20m range was insufficient for Johannes to be anywhere remotely out of sight to monitor the 360° shot, so Markus had to work with a posse of crew behind him, tethered via HDMI cable, all scrabbling to keep out of his way and the shot. To avoid sync issues, both tracking shots had to be executed within the same continuous music take, so after the first section, Markus' convoy would withdraw to his second position, ready for the other one-shot. In such close proximity to the mics, movement had to be stealthy and communication silent, but the advantage of Markus incidentally being an excellent drummer himself was soon self-evident: the shot flowed seamlessly with the music and his timing was impeccable. After five attempts, mostly aborted due to inevitable stumbles, Markus nailed two complete takes. Unfortunately, some jittering with faster movement only became evident when viewed on larger screens later on and, in retrospect, Johannes feels shooting 50fps would have been better.

After a couple of hours perfecting the tracking shots, plus another to cover the more rapidly cut, up-tempo middle section, it was time for a crucial drone shot that would transition from the forest setting to introduce the mountains for the first time... but the Phantom 4 wouldn't turn on! Eventually a glitch in the firmware update installed the night before was identified. With fading light threatening to ruin continuity, Plan B, in the shape of Johannes' backup Phantom 3+, came into play and, with moments to spare, the shot was calmly nailed in one take (Markus subsequently reinstalled the updated firmware and the Phantom 4 performed faultlessly from then on).

Without Easyrig, such intensive use of the Ronin would have been even more exhausting but, even so, Markus' back was pretty sore, making the two-hour drive home and 4am alarm the next day not much fun. The shoot took its toll on the whole team, although being in the zone and pushing through meant they didn't quite realise by how much until later on. Markus knew that something was up when he finally got home and couldn't get out of his car. It turned out he had damaged his knee and it took four days of R&R to recuperate fully.

Moving up the mountain

Day 2 was when the going really began to get tough for everyone: the team reconvened at a mountain hut, ready for a two-hour hike to the via ferrata ('iron way') location for the 'North Cluster' section, then later traversing this and climbing up to the 2203m Wankspitze peak location of 'Ridge View'.



Johannes captures B roll of mics being rigged as Michael monitors the trumpet sound levels

Both locations were logistically very challenging to shoot in. For 'North Cluster', the musicians were positioned and playing one above each other vertically along the iron rope – out of sight and earshot of each other. Johannes was filming from behind a rock at the top looking down, while Markus was at the bottom, with the rock face towering over him, making the most of the full range of his 70–200mm lens.

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Communication throughout the shoot was by a mixture of cheap radios, shouting and good old 'Chinese whispers', with key people relaying messages along the line. 'Ridge View', for instance, involved splitting the band and dotting them around two peaks, 50m apart, too far for voice or music to travel, and with a time-consuming climb of three or four times that distance separating them.

The fact that the crew managed to gain full coverage of each performance is astonishing. The range of shots encapsulate both the beauty as well as the jeopardy of

which was a departure from Johannes and Markus' more freestyle norm, as was the whole multicamera aspect of being mindful of each other's shots. When you add in Johannes also monitoring the visual story element as director, plus his producer role of keeping a grasp on safety and timetabling, he had quite a lot on his plate. Sticking to his 24-70mm zoom eased the workload, while making full use of his range of lenses, Markus undertook some pretty high-risk lens changes requiring deft balancing and coordination to avoid any crash zooms of the expensive and regrettable variety!



Markus captures on camera the moment when the musicians reach the peak, instruments strapped to their backs

the situations, with the camera moving seamlessly from breathtaking scenery to peering over cliff edges to reveal musicians perched precariously, mountain goat-like. At one point the camera cranes up smoothly past the cellist Johanna, past Manu, before moving on to the mountains in the background – just one of many beautifully crafted shots achieved despite the perilous nature of the terrain. It says a lot about both Johannes and Markus that both offered, unprompted, that some shots were stabilised in post. The stabilisation was clearly only minor but such modest self-deprecation only serves to further increase admiration for their skills and achievements.

The drone shots frequently provide an insightful behind-the-scenes peek at the ludicrously tight, jagged precipices on which the crew had just been operating. As a case in point, for the final chapter, the eponymous 'Parasol Peak', photographer Klemens and Manu's manager Tom operated cameras alongside the others, with them all carefully manoeuvring around each other, over the craggy snow-laden mountain face, with one eye on the viewfinder and the other on the 500m drop beneath them. To be roped would have got in the way of shooting and, ironically, made things more hazardous, so each had to rely on their spare hand grasping the wires tethering the huge cross at the top of the peak for safety.

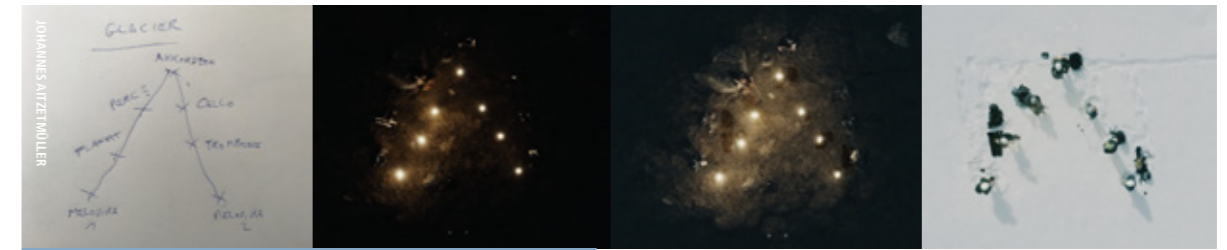
With Manu identifying every take and providing a handclap for syncing, the cameras recorded continuously for each take,

Environmental challenges

As they progressed up the mountain, so the weather threw up more and more challenges for both humans and musical instruments. At times, they were lucky to get through two takes before the instruments would go out of tune, which certainly focused minds, meaning everyone got very proficient at achieving what was needed first time on each take.

For the 'Listening Glacier' section, Markus' drone operating position was high up on a windy, snow-bound ridge, just 1m wide and with steep drops either side. As if that wasn't hard enough, it was on the limits of the drone's operating range from where the band were set – and, with fog and snow descending rapidly, it required immense levels of concentration just to react and maintain eyes on the drone, let alone frame up. His distance and angle made judging clearance by eye very difficult (and the white-out snowscape gave no helpful reference points), so he relied on the Phantom's camera and display to aid his judgment.

The extreme weather conditions had many repercussions throughout the shoot, but the prudent pre-planning paid dividends in damage limitation. On Day 3, with more than six hours' hiking involved, when the ascent and descent to the glacier each took an hour longer than scheduled, Manu had to call upon contingency time that he had hidden from the team "because if you know you have more time, you tend to go slower". When the deep snow cover meant they could no longer locate the planned spot, they were afforded time to find a safe, workable alternative; glaciers become no-go



Achieving a seamless transition from the night-time lake scene to the glacier took some planning – especially as the glacier shoot was before the lake!

Dark side of the moon

danger zones after heavy snow, as potentially lethal hazards like crevasses are concealed.

For each location, after one to three takes, the main cameras would withdraw to allow Markus to quickly transfer to the drone. Clearing the kit and crew from the scene could involve 100m vertical descents, but having all the crew behind him gave Markus the confidence that the whole vista in front was clear to shoot. As flat, open areas are rare in the Alps, an extended arm above his head provided a makeshift takeoff and landing pad.

The last drone shot near the end of the film – an epic 360° swoop around the peak, supremely timed to match the music – was a perfect example of how tight timing could get: within moments of that single, unrehearsed take, the weather deteriorated. It's fitting that Markus' proudest achievements are the film's visual bookends: the opening forest one-shot and this drone shot seconds from the end. They stretched his skills in new ways but, for him, these shots are a pure synthesis of the aesthetics of landscape and music.

After the long and arduous hike up to the glacier, plus a brief stop-off on the way back to record a standalone music performance (as per Red Bull's funding requirements), there was a brief respite for dinner at the base hut before setting off again at 10pm for the midnight 'Lake Serenade' location, which had been timed in order to take full advantage of a full moon.

Once again proving they could only plan so much, when they arrived at the lake, they discovered that a towering mountain was blocking their intended lunar fill light! Considering the location's only other light source was flaming torches, this could have been a problem. They knew the FS7s and fast lenses would be fine for the torchlit closer setups, but it was time for the a7Sii's superlative low-light sensitivity to come into its own to deal with the huge dynamic range within the wide shots. While the background landscape was in complete moonshadow, fortuitously, the broken cloud cover had the most ethereal backlight, bringing life and exquisite texture to the skies. The a7Sii, with its 12800 ISO,

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The culmination of the film: the seven musicians performing at the very top of the 'Parasol Peak'... as you do!

lapped up the soft, cool tones of the moonlight combined with the high-key warmth of the torchlight and the lake's mirror-flat reflections, giving a sumptuous, *Game of Thrones*-like, epic depth to the shot.

One further complication for the lake location involved setting up for a transitional top-down mix from the torchlit musicians in a 'V' formation to the same configuration on the glacier, shot earlier in the day. The glacier shot was the template needing to be replicated, so the band had memorised their space and position relative to each other and then, working from smartphone screengrabs from the glacier footage and utilising the handy reference grid superimposed on the drone monitor, the team tweaked their positions to near pinpoint accuracy, meaning the transition shot worked perfectly.

The musicians and crew unanimously felt this was their 'friendliest' location, even allowing tripods to take the strain for once. Consequently, they luxuriated in an unprecedented seven takes to get the very best out of the setting and perfect conditions until 3am, for which Manu rewarded them with a lie-in and morning off the next day. The original plan had required Day 4 to start with a pre-dawn torchlit climb for a spectacular sunrise setting for the finale, but as the sun was going to remain unseasonably obscured, the peak top shoot's time slot could slip to the afternoon.

Embracing the natural setting

The final scene to record (out of order) was the film's second chapter, 'Alpine Brook'. In concept, this part was intended to be an exploration of the introverted and extroverted, where the musicians become aware of their surroundings, telegraphed visually through creative use of focus and varying depth of field from deep to shallow. As the creek location was shrouded in dense, 100% humidity fog, the diminished visibility grounded the drone and the whole pre-visualised artistic look had to be rethought. The result is that the cold, dank weather conditions are oppressively omnipresent, magically enhancing Manu's watery composition, which integrates immersed cymbals and splashes as the musicians drum on rocks and drop stones into the brook. The result is a very intimate portrait of the drenched musicians' undeterred spirit that they will need in order to reach their peak performance. Once again, rather than ruining everything, the adverse conditions give the sequence its unique character, intrinsically interweaving location, conditions, musicians and their music as if by conscious design. And not a single smear or drop of water on the lens to spoil things!

Intriguingly, the team set out on this shoot with an open mind as to whether it would be a documentary or arthouse film, but the decision was clear as soon as they viewed the rushes. Furthermore, Manu and Johannes relish the irony that the unexpectedly extreme weather they cursed at for pushing the team to their limits of endurance and discomfort, would actually become their greatest stroke of luck. The diversity of conditions they experienced throughout the

shoot divested each section with its own powerfully distinct identity, contributing hugely to the unique nature of *Parasol Peak*. I'd say that it was the creative team's extraordinary flexibility, indomitable can-do positivity, combined with their skills and exemplary vision, that resulted in a most intriguing art film-cum-adventure travelogue documentary-cum-music film laced with breathtaking beauty and raw humanity.



Fact File

Johannes Aitzetmüller is a documentary/commercial cameraman and producer/director. Whether providing a holistic, concept-to-completion service to communicate clients' messages through high-impact artistic videos, or documenting hard-hitting human stories in the most inhospitable conditions, his company's core values are: integrity, creativity and effectiveness.

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Manu Delago's career as an internationally acclaimed percussionist and composer has seen him tour with artists such as Björk, The Cinematic Orchestra and LSO, as well as performing his own work in many of the world's great venues (Royal Albert Hall, Sydney Opera House, etc.). He has a number of albums to his name, and is synonymous with his favourite instrument, the Hang or handpan.

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