

Saturday 3 October / 6.30pm
Steve Reich at 90: Mallet Quartet

Steve Reich (born 1936)

Mallet Quartet

Aileen Sweeney (born 1994)

Starburst

Steve Reich began studying the snare drum at the age of 14. Throughout much of western musical history, percussion instruments were looked down upon - treated as sound effects rather than accrual musical instruments. But Reich's own creative breakthrough came about in 1970 when - surrounded on all sides by artificial sounds and avant-garde electronica – a trip to Ghana “confirmed my intuition that acoustic instruments could be used to produce music that was genuinely richer in sound than that produced with electronic instruments”. The sheer expressive vitality of percussion has been a central element in Reich's musical language for nearly six decades when he composed **Mallet Quartet** in 2009. In his own words:

Mallet Quartet is scored for two vibraphones and two five octave marimbas. I had never written for five octave marimbas extending down to cello C. On the one hand I was delighted to have the possibility of a low bass and on the other hand apprehensive since just slightly too hard a mallet that low can produce noise instead of pitch. Eventually, after a bit of experimentation, this was well worked out.

The piece is in three movements, fast, slow, fast. In the two outer fast movements the marimbas set the harmonic background which remains rather static compared to recent pieces of mine like Double Sextet (2007). The marimbas interlock in canon, also a procedure I have used in many other works. The vibes present the melodic material first solo and then in canon. However, in the central slow movement the texture changes into a thinner more transparent one with very spare use of notes, particularly in the marimbas. I was originally concerned this movement might just be “too thin”, but I think it ends up being the most striking, and certainly the least expected, of the piece.

Aileen Sweeney is a multi-award winning composer, arranger, accordionist and podcaster from Glasgow, who studied at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Her music is rooted in the traditional folk music she grew up with playing the accordion, and is often influenced by her interests in fields including cosmology, nature and folklore, alongside an admiration for many different genres of music.

Aileen's music has been performed across the UK from pubs on the isle of Skye and primary schools in Glasgow to the Wigmore Hall and the Royal Albert Hall in London. As well as composing, Aileen co-founded the folk-fusion band *Eriska*, who have self-released two albums. She co-hosts the award-winning podcast *Ear to the Ground* and teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Junior Academy.

Starburst was commissioned for Chamber Music Scotland and the Colin Currie Quartet, and was premiered in Glasgow in April 2024. According to the composer:

A 'starburst' is an astrophysical process in which stars are born at a particularly fast rate, which is particularly common when galaxies collide. Closer to home, 'starbursts' are a well-known brand of fruit-flavoured chewy sweets which I was often partial to on trips to the corner shop as a kid.

Older listeners may remember them as Opal Fruits.

Colin Currie Quartet

The Colin Currie Quartet is a bold and virtuosic percussion quartet, brought together by Colin Currie to perform works by Steve Reich alongside composers such as Julia Wolfe, Kevin Volans and Andy Akiho. They have made a name for their exciting performances of contemporary percussion works and for commissioning new music by the next generation of composers. Notable world premieres performed by the Quartet include works by Anna Meredith, Freya Waley-Cohen, Ben Nobuto, Joe Duddell and Aileen Sweeney.

The Colin Currie Quartet have appeared at festivals and venues including the BBC Proms, Wigmore Hall, Kings Place, Paris Présences Festival, Stoller Hall, Norfolk & Norwich Festival, Dublin Chamber Music Festival, Two Moors Festival, ConcertLab Utrecht, Barber Institute, West Road Cambridge, Concentus Moraviae, NCPA Beijing, and Nagakute Cultural Center.

In the 2026/27 season, the Quartet will give the world premiere of a new work by Robert Honstein at Milton Court London, and also performs across the UK including at The Glasshouse, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and in Manchester.