

Friday 2 October / 7.30pm

Steve Reich at 90: The Desert Music

Steve Reich (born 1936)

Clapping Music (1972)

Runner (2016)

Double Sextet (2007)

The Desert Music (1983)

Every journey begins with a single step. In the case of Steve Reich, we start with a pair of hands and a Spanish restaurant in Brussels, in the early 1970s. A local flamenco band came out and started clapping in time to the music. "We went out into the foggy Belgian night and started clapping at each other" recalls Reich, "and a lightbulb just went on in my head - what if there's a power failure in a gig, what if everything goes off? And that was it: 'This is it, EUREKA!', I got the inspiration to write **Clapping Music**."

There's something wonderfully appropriate about beginning a concert that ends with one of Reich's biggest and most ambitious musical statements, *The Desert Music*, with his smallest and (superficially at least), simplest. *Clapping Music* (1972) is almost a manifesto. In an era of rapid change, when the musical avant-garde was resorting to ever-more complex and alienating forms of technology, humanity is the measure of Reich's music. That remains true in **Runner**, composed in 2016 for winds, percussion, pianos and strings and conceived as a ballet score for the choreographer Wayne McGregor. Which art, indeed, celebrates human physicality more sublimely than ballet? "The title was suggested by the rapid opening and my awareness that, like a runner, I would have to pace the piece to reach a successful conclusion", says Reich.

None of which means that Reich shuns technology; rather, he uses it to liberate (rather than restrict) human expression. "There are two identical sextets in **Double Sextet**" (2007) explains Reich. "Each one is comprised of flute, clarinet, vibraphone, piano, violin and cello". But he leaves open the option to replace one of the sextets with a recording (ideally made by the same players). The work's fascination, and its endless variety, comes from the way the live players interact with one another over three movements (fast-slow-fast), each of which contains four distinct sections. The structure is ingenious; the expressive possibilities are almost infinite.

The ideas behind **The Desert Music** (1984). Meanwhile, address the fate of humanity itself, and Reich himself admits to being relieved (with hindsight) that he abandoned his early plan to use recordings of the poet William Carlos Williams reading his poetic prophecies for the atomic age. Instead, Reich uses one of the largest orchestras of his career, augmented by amplified singers. Its 50 minute arc opens with dark minor chords, rich in angst, and crackling with nervous energy. The music's bright, hectic bustle and its undertone of fear will feel familiar to anyone who lived through the nuclear stand-off of the late Cold War.

The desert, after all, is a place both of spiritual enlightenment, and deadly desolation, and Reich responded without inhibition to Carlos's apocalyptic verse. "I find Dr. Williams' finest work to be his late poetry written between 1954 and his death in 1963 at age 80", he comments:

It is from this period in the poet's work that I have selected the texts for The Desert Music – a period after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dr. Williams was acutely aware of the bomb and his words about it, in a poem about music entitled The Orchestra struck me as to the point: "Say to them:/ Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant/ to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize/ them, he must either change them or perish."

[...] *"In the centre of the piece is the text which says, 'it is a principle of music/ to repeat the theme. Repeat/ and repeat again,/ as the pace mounts. The/ theme is difficult/ but no more difficult/ than the facts to be/ resolved'. Those at all familiar with my music will know how apt those words are for me...*

Colin Currie

Hailed as being “at the summit of percussion performance today” (*Gramophone*), Colin Currie is a solo and chamber artist who champions new music at the highest level. His performances are likened to “witnessing a cross between a ballet dancer and a 100-meter sprinter” (*The Times*); and he works and performs regularly with today’s foremost conductors and orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Philharmonia Orchestra and London Philharmonic Orchestra.

A dynamic and adventurous soloist, Currie’s commitment to commissioning and creating new music was recognised with the Royal Philharmonic Society’s 2015 Instrumentalist Award. Currie has premiered works by Steve Reich, Louis Andriessen, HK Gruber, Sir James MacMillan, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Jennifer Higdon, Brett Dean, Helen Grime, Julia Wolfe, Kalevi Aho, Andy Akiho, Andrew Norman, Bruno Mantovani, Gavin Higgins, Dave Maric, Nicole Lizée, Danny Elfman, Guillaume Connesson, Steve Martland, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Elliott Carter, and Dani Howard.

At the start of his 2026-2027 season, Currie premiered the 40th concerto of his career – Tansy Davies’ *Earthworks* at Aldeburgh Festival with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Other concerto highlights of Currie’s season include performing Helen Grime’s *Percussion Concerto* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Andy Akiho’s *Percussion Concerto* with the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra and Andrew Norman’s *Switch* with Orquesta Sinfónica Castilla y León. A major focus of this season will be the celebration of Steve Reich’s 90th birthday, with Currie appearing in multiple roles as curator, conductor and performer with his ensembles the Colin Currie Group and Colin Currie Quartet. Currie conducts programmes of Reich with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony and Royal Northern Sinfonia; at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, Currie has curated a full, multiple-concert Reich celebration weekend in October 2026.

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They’re also working hard to smash the barriers that can stop brilliant people getting into classical music. They’ve teamed up with national partners to support women conductors to develop their careers, to help global majority musicians get vital experience in the orchestra world, and to celebrate disabled and non-disabled musicians breaking new ground together in inclusive ensemble RNS Moves. And they bring new musical opportunities to the region, headlining the first-ever BBC Proms weekend outside London.

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With 65 years of success to build on, they’ve signed a dynamic artistic leadership – Music Director Dinis Sousa, Artistic Partner Maria Włoszczowska, Principal Guest Conductor Nil Venditti and Associate Conductor Ellie Slorach – to lead the way into a bold, bright future.