Sunday 4 October / 3pm

Steve Reich at 90: Different Trains with Bryce Dessner

Bryce Dessner (born 1976)

Garcia Counterpoint (2015)

Ahyem (Homeward) (2009)

Tromp Miniature (2014

Murder Ballades (2013)

Steve Reich (born 1936)
Different Trains

"Firstly, I'm a collaborator" said the American composer and electric guitarist Bryce Dessner, in a interview with Hannah Nepilová of the *Financial Times*. "I'm really open to the feedback of the musicians and I'm driven by that sense of human exchange. Secondly I'm a student. I love throwing myself into the deep end and finding new ways of expression." But while Dessner's musical collaborators have included Steve Reich , Paul Simon and Taylor Swift, his own music remains unambiguously his own – inspired by his idols and colleagues and his lifelong immersion in American popular culture, reimagined as something wholly new and thrillingly potent.

So **Garcia Counterpoint** reframes an imaginary meeting between the Reich of *Electric Counterpoint* and Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. **Tromp Miniature** is an ingenious test-piece for the 2014 International Tromp Percussion Competition in Eindhoven, and **Murder Ballades** (2013) are an ongoing exploration of a forgotten American tradition – instrumental reworkings of the short-lived popular songs (some macabre, others disarmingly lively) with which 19th century balladeers capitalised on sensational murder cases.

In one sense, Dessner's music is a (strikingly individual) product of the American melting pot. **Aheym (Homeward)** (2009) however, strikes very close to home. "Aheym means 'homeward' in Yiddish" writes Dessner. "As little boys, my brother and I used to spend hours with my grandmother, asking her about the details of how she came to America. (My father's family were Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia) […] In her poem *Di rayze aheym*, the American-Yiddish poet Irena Klepfisz, one of the few child survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto, writes: 'Among strangers is her home. Here right here she must live. Her memories will become monuments.'" *Aheym* is dedicated to Dessner's grandmother Sarah.

Dessner's impassioned musical testament shares an unignorable musical kinship with Steve Reich's **Different Trains** (1988) – and not merely because both works were premiered by the Kronos Quartet. Reich has never concealed his Jewish heritage, but in this work for string quartet and tape he explores his family story with an originality and an emotional honesty that have made *Different Trains* a modern classic - possibly Reich's single best-known work. He explained its genesis in his own words:

The idea for the piece came from my childhood. When I was one year old my parents separated. My mother moved to Los Angeles and my father stayed in New York [and] I travelled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942 accompanied by my governess. While the trips were exciting and romantic at the time I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains… In order to prepare the tape I did the following:

1. Record my governess Virginia, then in her seventies, reminiscing about our train trips together.

2. Record a retired Pullman porter, Lawrence Davis, then in his eighties, who used to ride lines between New York and Los Angeles.

3. Collect recordings of Holocaust survivors Rachella, Paul and Rachel, all about my age and then living in America.

4. Collect recorded American and European train sounds of the '30s and '40s

I selected small speech samples that are more or less clearly pitched and then notated them as accurately as possible in musical notation. The strings then literally imitate that speech melody. Three separate string quartets are also added to the pre-recorded tape and the final live quartet part is added in performance. Different Trains is in three movements (played without pause). They are:

America - Before the war

Europe - During the war

After the war.

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.

Bryce Dessner

Bryce Dessner is a vital and rare force in new music. He has won Grammy Awards as a classical composer, with his band The National, and for his work in film music. He is regularly commissioned to write for the world's leading ensembles, from Orchestre de Paris to Los Angeles Philharmonic, and is in demand as composer in residence. He is also a high-profile, Oscar-nominated presence in film score composition, with credits including Clint Bentley's Train Dreams, Alejandro González Iñárritu's The Revenant with the late Ryuichi Sakamoto and Fernando Meirelles's The Two Popes.

The 2025/26 season included composer residencies at Konzerthaus Berlin and with Czech Philharmonic; world premieres of his works at Carnegie Hall, Dublin's National Concert Hall and Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; plus the soundtrack release to Train Dreams (Netflix).

Autumn 2025 saw Dessner receive the Samuel Beckett Gold Medal from Trinity College Dublin, recognising his outstanding contribution to public discourse through the arts. Previous recipients include Joan Baez, Patti Smith and George Martin.

In August 2024, Bryce Dessner released Solos (Sony Classical), showcasing his collection of solo instrumental pieces in collaboration with some of the world's leading musicians, including Katia Labèque, Anastasia Kobekina, Pekka Kuusisto, Nadia Sirota, Colin Currie and Lavinia Meijer. Dessner's recordings also include El Chan; St. Carolyn by the Sea (both on Deutsche Grammophon); Aheym, commissioned by Kronos Quartet; Tenebre, an album of his works for string orchestra recorded by Germany's Ensemble Resonanz and which won a 2019 Opus Klassik award and a Diapason d'Or; When we are inhuman with Bonnie 'Prince' Billy and Eighth Blackbird (2019) and Impermanence (2021) with Australian String Quartet and which won the Libera award.

Also active as a curator, Dessner is regularly requested to programme festivals and residencies around the world, such as at the Barbican, Philharmonie de Paris, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie and Tonhalle Orchestra, Zurich, where during the 2023-24 season he was Creative Chair. Dessner co-curates the Irish festival, Sounds from a Safe Harbour.

Royal Northern Sinfonia

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From symphonies to string quartets, film soundtracks to choral masses, and original performances with awesome artists from Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Víkingur Ólafsson to Sam Fender and Self Esteem, the orchestra's members have got one of the most varied jobs there is. They're always looking for fresh new sounds from up-and-coming composers, inviting local communities to share a stage, and doing everything they can to inspire and prepare the musicians of tomorrow to one day take their place.

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.

Because they whole-heartedly believe orchestral music is for anyone – big cities and rural villages, tiny babies and life-long listeners, die-hard fans and curious minds – they travel far and wide to make sure there's top-notch classical music on offer in as many places as possible. You'll find them in churches, castles, and community venues across the North, as well as leading the charge in Carlisle, Kendal, Middlesbrough, and Sunderland.

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.

Wherever the orchestra play and whoever they share a stage with, every performance is a chance to see, hear and feel the music.