

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Colin Currie Group: Reich & Turnage

Thursday 28 March 2024, 7.30pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2024.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Steve Reich Music for pieces of wood 9'

Rolf Wallin Twine for xylophone & marimba 14'

Julia Wolfe Dark Full Ride for percussion quartet 17'

Interval

Steve Reich Drumming – Part 1 for tuned bongo drums 17'

Mark-Anthony Turnage New England Etudes for percussion sextet (UK premiere) 18'

Performers

Colin Currie Group

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes with a 20-minute interval.

Steve Reich (b. 1936)

Music for pieces of wood (1973)

Among American minimalist composers who transformed the face of contemporary music in the late 20th century, Steve Reich is among the most esteemed. A major characteristic of his early works, which helped to build that style, is the technique of 'phasing'. Here, different musical lines move in and out of sync with each other, creating a shifting, evolving pattern. Trained as a drummer, Reich is fascinated by the music of Africa, Asia and Jewish traditions; these lend his works elements of spirituality and ritual alongside their rhythmic vitality.

Music for Pieces of Wood was written in 1973. Reich writes that it 'grows out of the same roots as *Clapping Music*: a desire to make music with the simplest possible instruments. The claves, or cylindrical pieces of hard wood, used here were selected for their particular pitches (A, B, C#, D#, and D# an octave above), and for their resonant timbre. This piece is one of the loudest I have ever composed, but uses no amplification whatsoever. The rhythmic structure is based entirely on the process of rhythmic "buildups" or the substitution of beats for rests, and is in three sections of decreasing pattern length: 6/4, 4/4, 3/4.' Each player is asked to repeat each bar 'approximately' the stipulated number of times. Therefore every performance can be slightly different.

Rolf Wallin (b. 1957)

Twine for xylophone and marimba (1995)

Reich's influence has percolated through the musical world, but only a handful of other composers have adopted the idea of phasing. These include the Norwegian composer Rolf Wallin, whose plethora of influences include jazz, avant-garde rock and early music.

Born in Oslo in 1957 and trained in California, Wallin has at his disposal a tremendous range of techniques, encompassing everything from intuitive composition to fractal mathematics, while his works range from film and installations to a piece for just two instruments such as *Twine* for xylophone and marimba. It was written in 1995, commissioned by Danish Radio. Each instrument is characterised by its individual system of tuning, the harmonics producing subtly contrasted timbres which Wallin allows to meet and meld.

He writes: 'Two streams of sound, both emerging from the same physical substance (wood), but still slightly different: the bright and hard versus the dark and soft. Two streams twisting and twining, separating and merging, opposing and caressing. Two streams living their own separate lives, but still influenced by the other.'

Julia Wolfe (b. 1958)

Dark Full Ride for percussion quartet (2002)

The Bang on a Can movement, co-founded by the composers Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe, grew from a 1987 one-day marathon concert in a New York art gallery to embrace an international community for new music. 'We believed that making new music is a utopian act – that people needed to hear this music and they needed to hear it presented in the most persuasive way, with the best players, with the best programs, for the best listeners, in the best context,' the three composers state.

Wolfe, winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Music, is influenced by folk, classical and rock, the visceral power of her music stripping out the barriers between genres. She wrote *Dark Full Ride* for the Talujon Percussion Quartet, who premiered it in New York in 2002. It speaks loud and clear – especially loud – of the impact of Reich's phasing technique. Towards the end, Wolfe writes, 'the four players are playing beats at different tempos while speeding up and slowing down relative to each other.'

She took the title from a phrase printed on the back of a ride cymbal. Inspired by drummers' ability to play with their hands and feet simultaneously, she had decided to write for four drum kits, but became fascinated by the hi-hat and created the first seven minutes for this alone. 'It's an amazing instrument – two cymbals crashing together by means of a foot pedal and struck from above,' she writes. 'It produces an enormous range of shimmering colors. Just opening and closing the cymbals allow for symphonic possibilities. You can play the cymbals on the edge, play on the bell (top), roll, attack, be delicate, and my favorite – make the hi-hat roar.'

Steve Reich

Drumming – Part 1 for tuned bongo drums (1970–71)

'For one year, between the fall of 1970 and the fall of 1971, I worked on what turned out to be the longest piece I have ever composed,' Reich writes. This was *Drumming*, a work in four parts, each for a different set of instruments. It grew largely out of his visit to Ghana the previous year to study drumming and learn about the country's long history of complex rhythmic counterpoint.

'*Drumming* is the final expansion and refinement of the phasing process, a process discovered with tape loops that does not appear elsewhere in non-Western or Western music,' he writes. '*Drumming* also has only one basic rhythmic pattern throughout. This pattern undergoes changes of phase position, pitch, and

timbre, but all the performers play this pattern, or some part of it, throughout the entire piece.'

Part 1 is for four pairs of tuned bongo drums, stand-mounted and played with sticks. It begins with two drummers and just one beat sounding from the essential rhythm's 12 quavers. The sound builds through various permutations, embellishments, shifts of emphasis and different combinations of players. Underneath, the pulse remains constant throughout.

Mark-Anthony Turnage (b. 1960)

New England Etudes for percussion sextet (UK premiere) (2022)

Etude 1

Etude 2

Etude 3 (Conga)

Etude 4

Etude 5 (Bells for Ukraine)

Etude 6

The British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage draws upon eclectic influences that flavour his characterful and adventurous sound-worlds. His *New England Etudes* for percussion sextet were written in 2022 and dedicated to Will Hudgins, head of the percussion department at New England Conservatory, a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a friend of the composer since the two first met at Tanglewood in 1983.

Turnage's interest in jazz is clear at once through the rhythmic swing of the opening, as well as the inclusion of a drum set-style setup and two vibraphones. A succession of rhythms and motifs shared between the instruments characterise most of the etudes, but the fifth is the exception. Entitled 'Bells for Ukraine', it has the atmosphere of a lament for that country.

The *New England Etudes* were a co-commission between the New England Conservatory, the Colin Currie Group, Conservatorium van Amsterdam, Eastman School of Music, ensembleNEWSRQ, Geneva Percussion Ensemble, The Juilliard School, The New World Symphony Percussion Consort, Southern Methodist University and the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble, which gave the world premiere in its home venue in February 2023. Tonight is the first UK performance.

Programme notes © Jessica Duchon, 2024

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