

BRYCE DESSNER'S TREMBLING EARTH

19 & 20 SEPTEMBER 2026

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House



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SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PATRON Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS CONCERT

Expect to enjoy yourself! Maybe your heart will beat a little faster. Maybe your hair will stand on end. It's hard to predict or describe how the vast sound of a symphony orchestra will affect each of us. Just bring an open mind and engage with the music – close your eyes, watch the conductor and the musicians, or just sit back and let the music take you away.



When do I clap?

Good question. Most pieces of music are broken up into different movements – usually, people only clap at the end of a piece, so there will be silent pauses between movements. On the next page you will see how many movements the pieces in this concert have, and the duration of each piece. But the simplest thing is to wait until the conductor turns around – or when everyone else starts applauding.

The conductor may leave the stage and come back on a few times, and acknowledge the different sections of the orchestra. You can keep clapping as long as you want to – and feel free to cheer and stomp your feet if you really enjoyed the concert!



Can I take photos or videos?

You can take photos and videos on your phone during the applause at the end of a piece of music. **Please switch your phone to silent, make sure the flash is off and dim the brightness of your screen so you don't distract other audience members.** And if you share it to your socials, tag us in your posts! We love seeing what people have captured.

Please leave professional and semi-professional camera gear at home and limit yourself to a phone camera inside the venue.



What happens at interval?

The interval will begin when the conductor leaves the stage and the lights go to their full brightness. You can choose to stay in your seat and wait, go to the bathroom, walk around or purchase food or drink from one of the foyer bars.

An announcement will play through the speaker system 10 minutes, 5 minutes and 1 minute before the concert resumes.

2026 CONCERT SEASON

BRYCE DESSNER’S TREMBLING EARTH

WITH ANASTASIA KOBEKINA & UMBERTO CLERICI

UMBERTO CLERICI conductor

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923–2006)
Concert Românesc (Romanian Concerto) (1951)
i. Andantino
ii. Allegro vivace
iii. Adagio ma non troppo
iv. Molto vivace

BRYCE DESSNER (born 1976)
Trembling Earth, Symphony for Cello and Orchestra (2025)
AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE
ANASTASIA KOBEKINA cello

INTERVAL

BRYCE DESSNER (born 1976)
St. Carolyn by the Sea (2011)
BRYCE DESSNER electric guitar
ZANE BANKS electric guitar

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)
Symphony No.8 in G major, Op.88 (1889)
i. Allegro con brio
ii. Adagio
iii. Allegretto grazioso – Molto vivace
iv. Allegro ma non troppo

Saturday 19 September, 7pm
Symphonic Saturdays

Sunday 20 September, 2pm
Sunday Afternoon Symphony
Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

Estimated durations
Ligeti – 12 minutes
Trembling Earth – 20 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
St. Carolyn – 15 minutes
Dvořák – 35 minutes

Cover image
Anastasia Kobekina
Photo by Xenia Zasetskaya

Bryce Dessner’s *Trembling Earth* was co-commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra supported by Paolo Hooke and Fan Guo, together with National Concert Hall, Dublin and Czech Philharmonic, Borlett-Buitoni Trust, Konzerthaus Berlin and Philharmonia Orchestra.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land and water on which we work and perform. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.



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YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923–2006)

Concert Românesc (Romanian Concerto) (1951)

The four movements of this early work show Ligeti fulfilling his duty as a composer in Soviet-era Hungary by writing music based on vernacular material. It also serves to preserve some of the folk music of the region, and shows Ligeti's keen and quirky ear for sonority. Perhaps that's why it was banned.

It was composed in 1951, the year that saw the first dogs in space, the death-sentence passed on Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the signing of the ANZUS treaty. Contemporary music included Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel*, John Cage's *Music of Changes* and Dmitri Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues.



György Ligeti in 1961. Photo by Willy Pragher (1908–1992). Source: Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, CC BY 3.0 DE, via Wikimedia Commons

BRYCE DESSNER (born 1976)

Trembling Earth, Symphony for Cello and Orchestra (2025)

AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

Trembling Earth is a single-movement concerto for cello and orchestra. It offers ample opportunities for the cello to display its breadth of expressive potential, and passes through a number of sharply contrasting musical landscapes. It never loses sight of the energy expressed in Shakespeare's image from *Macbeth*, 'Some say the earth was feverous and did shake.'

Trembling Earth premiered in 2025.



Bryce Dessner. Photo by Jens Koch.

BRYCE DESSNER (born 1976)

St. Carolyn by the Sea (2011)

St. Carolyn by the Sea is a 15-minute concertante work for two electric guitars and orchestra, inspired by a moment in Jack Kerouac's novel *Big Sur*.

It premiered in 2011, a year that saw the 'Arab Spring' protests in the Middle East and North Africa, the beginning of the Occupy movement on Wall Street and 'blockchain' added to the dictionary.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

Symphony No.8 in G major, Op.88 (1889)

Dvořák's Eighth is, on the face of it, a four-movement neo-classical work on the same design as other works of his, and those of his mentor Brahms. But it also downplays the rigours of Austro-German symphonic writing in favour of a more 'direct' manner concentrating on folk-inspired melody.

It premiered in 1890, the year that saw the establishment of Yosemite National Park in the US, the invention of the Ouija board and the publication of *The Man from Snowy River*.

Contemporary music included Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*, Ernest Chausson's *Shakespeare Songs* and Tchaikovsky's opera *Pique Dame* (The Queen of Spades).



Dvořák in 1882. Source: Gallica Digital Library (digital ID btvlb8417521d)/Wikimedia Commons.

MAHLER SYMPHONY NO. 3

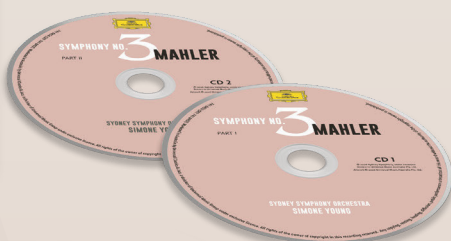


**SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
SIMONE YOUNG**



**“This was a
gala performance
to savour” *Limelight***

This recording of Mahler's Third Symphony signals a new partnership between the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Universal Music Australia on the Deutsche Grammophon label. An epic, six-movement work, the symphony traverses nature, humanity, spirituality and redemption across nearly 100 minutes. It features mezzo-soprano Noa Beinart, the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and The Sydney Children's Choir.



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BARTON: OF THE EARTH

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

UMBERTO CLERICI conductor

After a career spanning more than 20 years as a gifted cello soloist and orchestral musician, Umberto Clerici has consolidated his diverse artist achievements to rapid acclaim as a conductor. Umberto is now the Chief Conductor of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra.

Umberto began his career as a virtuoso cellist making his solo debut at the age of 17 performing Haydn's D Major cello concerto in Japan. After years of performing on the stages of the world's most prestigious concert halls, Umberto took up the position as Principal cello of the Teatro Regio di Torino following which he was Principal Cello of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from 2014 to 2021.

It was in Sydney in 2018 that Umberto made his conducting debut with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House. Following a swift trajectory of prestigious conducting engagements, Umberto is now in high demand across Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

In addition to his role Chief Conductor of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Umberto's recent conducting engagements include Elgar's Cello Concerto with Steven Isserlis for the Volksoper Vienna, and debuts with Orchestra del Teatro Massimo in Palermo and Orchestra Regionale Toscana. Umberto has also curated a three-week series with the Sydney Symphony for the Orchestra's *Symphony Hour* series and returned to the podiums of the Dunedin, Melbourne and West Australian Symphony Orchestras.

In November 2024, Queensland Symphony Orchestra announced the extension of Umberto's Chief Conductorship until the end of their Season 2027.

As a cellist, Umberto remains beloved by audiences worldwide, having performed internationally as a soloist at New York's Carnegie Hall, Vienna's Musikverein, the great Shostakovich Hall of St Petersburg, Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome, the Salzburg Festival and is one of only two Italians to have ever won a prize for cello in the prestigious International Tchaikovsky Competition.

Umberto plays cellos by Matteo Goffriller (made in 1722, Venezia) and Carlo Antonio Testore (made in 1758, Milano).



Photo by David Kelly

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ANASTASIA KOBEKINA cello

Hailed as an ‘unrivaled musician’ by *Le Figaro*, Anastasia Kobekina captivates audiences with her stunning musicality, multi-layered interpretations, and charismatic stage presence. She is the recipient of the 2024 Leonard Bernstein Award.

In May 2023, Anastasia signed an exclusive recording contract with Sony Classical. Her debut album *Venice* was released in February 2024, followed by the prestigious Opus Klassik Award in October 2024. Her next album, featuring the solo cello suites by JS Bach, was released in September 2025. In February 2025, the German broadcaster ARD released a four-part documentary about her titled *Anastasia Kobekina – Jetzt oder nie* (Now or Never).

She made her acclaimed BBC Proms debut in 2024 with the Czech Philharmonic under Jakub Hrůša, performing Dvořák’s Cello Concerto. In 2025, she returned to the Royal Albert Hall for two more appearances: in *From Dark Till Dawn*, curated by Anna Lapwood, and with Shostakovich’s First Cello Concerto, performed alongside the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Delyana Lazarova.

In 2024, Anastasia was the focus artist of the Rheingau Music Festival. In 2025, she served as Artist-in-Residence at the Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Beethovenfest Bonn.

Highlights of the 2025/26 season included performances with the Czech Philharmonic under Semyon Bychkov, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin under Iván Fischer, the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields.

Her performances have taken her to leading venues and festivals worldwide, including Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Lincoln Center, Konzerthaus Vienna, Berlin Philharmonie, Tonhalle Zürich, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Gstaad Menuhin Festival, Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, Rheingau Musik Festival, Beethovenfest Bonn, Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and the Verbier Festival.

She has worked with renowned conductors such as Semyon Bychkov, Paavo Järvi, Jakub Hrůša, Krzysztof Penderecki, Heinrich Schiff, Omer Meir Wellber, Vasily Petrenko and Charles Dutoit.

Anastasia is a prizewinner at international competitions including the Tchaikovsky Competition (2019) and the Enescu Competition (2016). From 2018 to 2021, she was a BBC New Generation Artist and received the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2022.

Born in Russia, Anastasia began cello lessons at the age of four. She studied with Frans Helmerson and Jens-Peter Maintz in Germany, with Jérôme Pernoo in Paris, and completed her baroque cello studies with Kristin von der Goltz in Frankfurt.

She performs on a 1717 ‘Bonamy Dobree-Suggia’ cello by Antonio Stradivari, generously loaned by the Stradivari Foundation Habisreutinger-Huggler-Coray.



Photo by Julia Altukhova

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ZANE BANKS electric guitar

Described by internationally renowned guitarist Slava Grigoryan as ‘an incredible soloist’, Australian guitarist Dr Zane Banks has established himself as one of the most versatile and compelling performers of his generation. His artistry has been recognised widely: he was awarded Best Newcomer by *Limelight* magazine in 2011, and critics have praised him as a ‘multi-genre firebrand’ (Adelaide Symphony Orchestra), ‘an expert guitarist’ (*The American Record Guide*) and ‘an outstanding young Australian artist’ (*Limelight*). His performances have been described as ‘genuinely moving’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and ‘glorious’ (*Hobart Mercury*).

Equally at home on classical, electric and steel-string guitars, Zane’s career reflects an uncommon breadth. He has appeared across Europe, Asia and Australia in roles ranging from concerto soloist to chamber musician and ensemble collaborator. His orchestral engagements include performances with the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria, Eminence Symphony Orchestra and the Auckland, Adelaide and Sydney symphony orchestras, bringing a distinctive musical voice to both traditional and contemporary settings.

Born and educated in Sydney, Zane studied classical and jazz guitar at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where he later completed a Doctor of Musical Arts focusing on *The Role of the Electric Guitar in Art Music*. This research reflects his long-standing commitment to expanding the presence of the electric guitar within the concert hall. Outside the classical sphere, he maintains an active profile as a performer of rock, blues, country, bluegrass, folk and jazz, regularly appearing at festivals and venues throughout Australia.

Zane has worked closely with leading Australian composers, including Georges Lentz, Brett Dean and Andrew Ford, premiering numerous works written specifically for him. A landmark moment in his career came in 2007 with the world premiere of Georges Lentz’s *Ingwe*, a monumental 60-minute work for unaccompanied electric guitar, presented at the Luxembourg Philharmonie. His subsequent Naxos recording of the work received international acclaim and introduced his artistry to audiences worldwide.

In 2016, Zane gave the world premiere of Andrew Ford’s electric guitar concerto *Raga* with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, a performance broadcast nationally on ABC Classic and celebrated for its originality and expressive power.

A dynamic advocate for the guitar in all its forms, Zane Banks continues to champion new music while bringing exceptional clarity, versatility and musical imagination to every performance.



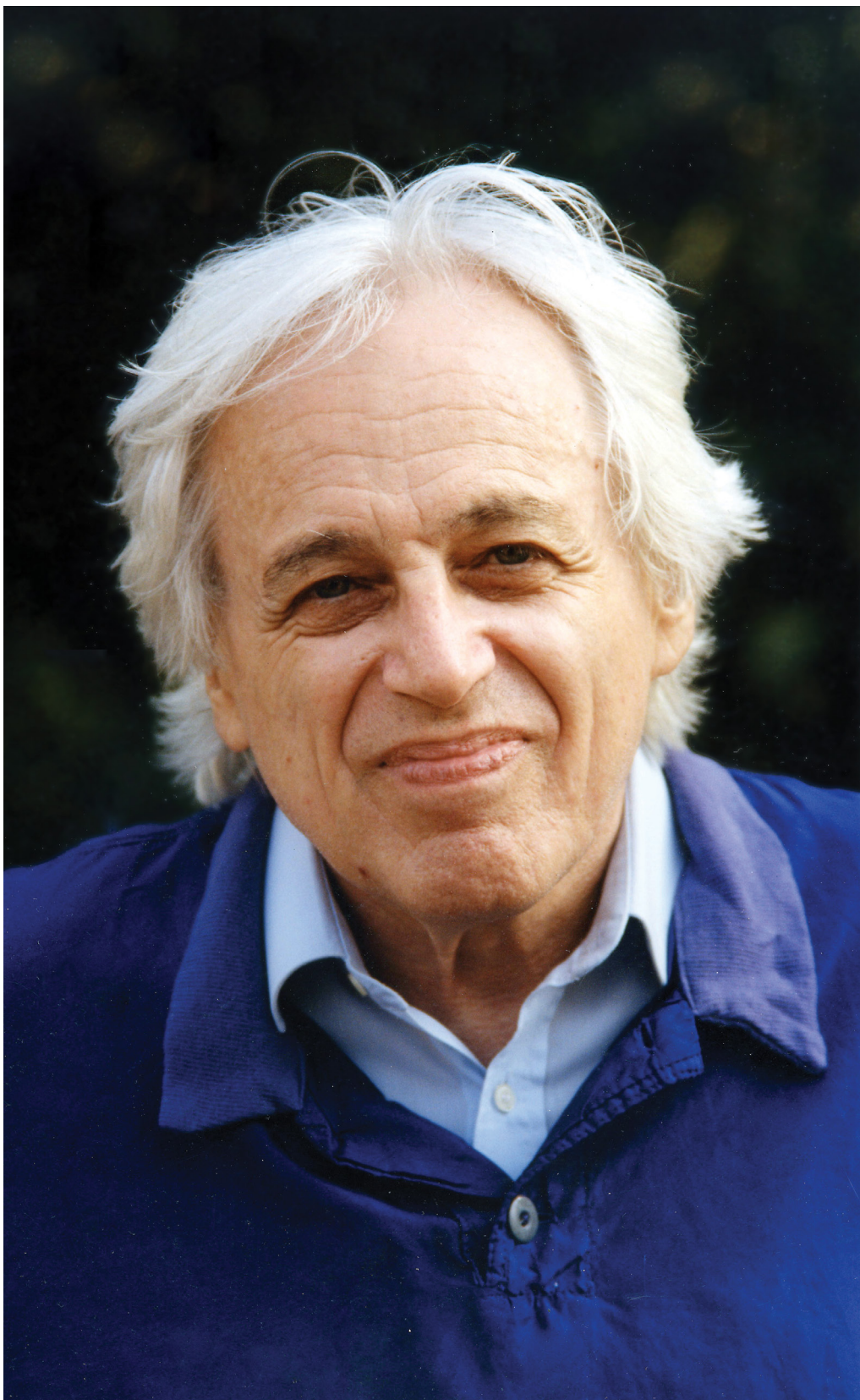


Photo by Peter Andersen, courtesy Schott Music.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT GYÖRGY LIGETI

After escaping from communist Hungary in 1956, Ligeti went first to Vienna and then to Cologne. In Hungary, Ligeti's exposure to modernist Western music had been severely limited by official disapproval. Vienna, by contrast, had latterly been the city of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, while music in Cologne was dominated by the precociously brilliant Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Cologne was also home to a vital electronic music scene where Ligeti quickly mastered new technologies that enabled him to create sounds unimagined by him a few years before. Colleagues like Boulez and Stockhausen explored abstract and often highly complex models to determine the structure of their works, while Ligeti, perhaps in relieved revolt against the formal constraints of socialist realism, wanted to write 'music without beginning or end'. The possibilities offered by the electronic studio allowed him to experiment with pure texture, which he transferred to the orchestral palette with his characteristically precise ear for sound.

Ligeti was born in Dicsőszentmárton, a Hungarian speaking enclave in the Romanian district of Transylvania, and it was only when he was in his teens that the composer learned to speak Romanian. He had, however, come into contact with Romanian folk music as a young child. He described hearing the alpenhorn played in the Carpathian Mountains and being entranced by the fact that the natural harmonic series used by the instrument made it sound weirdly and beautifully 'out of tune' – out of tune, that is according to the system of equal temperament used in Western music since the 18th century. The expressive possibility of unequal temperament remained a feature of Ligeti's music until his death: in his Violin Concerto, for instance, a group of ocarinas – impossible to play conventionally in tune – add an unspeakable pathos at a critical moment in the work. Ligeti also remembered an occasion when one New Year's Eve, some musicians playing violin and bagpipe, dressed in shamanistic goat-costumes, forced their way into his family's courtyard.

ABOUT THE ROMANIAN CONCERTO

In 1949, Ligeti was set to work transcribing folksongs from wax cylinder recordings in Bucharest, and some of those melodies, as well as tunes he recalled from childhood, came together in his *Romanian Concerto* composed in 1951. The piece's four short movements contain at least one or two tunes which will be familiar to Bartók lovers. In addition, as Ligeti noted, 'I also invented elements in the spirit of the village bands'. This, however, got him into trouble with the authorities in Budapest, where the piece had a single closed rehearsal before being banned. As the composer once explained:

The way in which village bands harmonised their music, often full of dissonances and 'against the grain' was regarded as incorrect. In the fourth movement of my *Romanian Concerto* there is a passage in which an F sharp is heard in the context of F major. This was reason enough for the apparatchiks responsible for the arts to ban the piece.

In fact, in the years immediately after his relocation to the West and immersion in the world of the post war avant-garde, Ligeti himself disparaged the piece as 'embodying the height of my compositional misconceptions'. He withdrew the work until the 1990s when, after some revision, he allowed it to be performed again. The *Romanian Concerto* is a long way from the Ligeti of *Atmosphères* and *Lontano*, or the knockabout fun of the Piano Concerto, but contains hints of the orchestral sonority and rhythmic exuberance of later works. It also displays a genuine love for the material, as well as the embryonic technical brilliance of one of the greatest composers of the last century.

Ligeti's concerto is scored for 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling cor anglais), 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 3 horns and 2 trumpets; percussion and strings.

The piece was first played in a private orchestral rehearsal in Budapest in the 1950s, but it was not officially premiered until 21 August 1971, at the Peninsula Music Festival in Fish Creek, Wisconsin, with Thor Johnson conducting The Festival Orchestra.

The Sydney Symphony did not perform the work until 2017, when our then-Chief Conductor David Robertson led performances in Sydney, and in Shanghai and Beijing on our International Tour.



Photo by Jens Koch

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT BRYCE DESSNER

Bryce Dessner is a vital and rare force in new music. He has won Grammy Awards as a classical composer and with the band The National, of which he is founding member, guitarist, arranger, and co-principal songwriter. He is regularly commissioned to write for the world's leading ensembles, from Orchestre de Paris to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and is a high-profile presence in film score composition, with credits including *The Revenant*, for which he was Grammy and Golden Globe nominated, Fernando Mereilles's *The Two Popes*, Mike Mill's *C'mon C'mon* and the forthcoming *Bardo*, by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Dessner collaborates with some of today's most creative and respected artists, including Philip Glass, Katia and Marielle Labèque, Paul Simon, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Sufjan Stevens, Fernando Mereilles, Thom Yorke, Bon Iver, Nico Muhly and Steve Reich, who named Dessner 'a major voice of his generation.' Dessner's orchestrations can be heard on the latest albums of Paul Simon, Bon Iver and Taylor Swift.

Bryce Dessner has had works commissioned and premiered by today's leading conductors including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Gustavo Dudamel, Semyon Bychkov, and Santtu Matias-Rouvali. This season alone sees performances of his works by, amongst others, London's Philharmonia Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, BBC Symphony Orchestra, HR Sinfonieorchester, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and San Francisco Symphony. New works *Violin Concerto* – commissioned by partners including Orchestre de Paris, Philharmonia Orchestra and San Francisco Symphony – and *Mari*, commissioned and performed by Tonhalle Orchester Zurich, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchester, Czech Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic and BBC Symphony Orchestra – have been met with widespread public and critical success.

In addition to his role as one of eight San Francisco Symphony Collaborative Partners, Bryce Dessner is currently Artist-in-Residence at London's Southbank Centre and with Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. Major works include *Concerto for Two Pianos* premiered by Katia & Marielle Labèque,

London Philharmonic Orchestra and recorded for Deutsche Grammophon; *Violin Concerto* premiered and performed internationally by Pekka Kuusisto, *Trombone Concerto* for Jorgen van Rijen commissioned by Dallas Symphony and l'Orchestre National d'Île de France; *Voy a Dormir* for mezzo soprano Kelley O'Connor and Orchestra of Saint Luke's and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra; *Skrik Trio* for Steve Reich and Carnegie Hall; the ballet *No Tomorrow* co-written with Ragnar Kjartansson; *Wires* for Ensemble Intercontemporain; *The Forest* for large cello ensemble, Gautier Capuçon and Fondation Louis Vuitton; and *Triptych (Eyes for One on Another)*, a major theatre piece integrating the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and premiered by Los Angeles Philharmonic. Dessner also scored the music – involving full orchestra and a 200-member choir – for the Louis Vuitton show at the Louvre in Paris as part of Paris Fashion Week 2020.

Dessner's recordings include *El Chan*; *St. Carolyn by the Sea* (both 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 the Australian String Quartet. Dessner's other film score credits include *The Two Popes*, which won Discovery of the Year at the World Soundtrack awards; *C'mon C'mon* (2021) directed by Mike Mills and *Cyrano* (2021), the major musical by Joe Wright.

Also active as a curator, Dessner is regularly requested to program festivals and residencies around the world at venues such as at the Barbican, Philharmonie de Paris, and Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie. He co-founded and curates the festivals MusicNOW in Cincinnati, HAVEN in Copenhagen, Sounds from a Safe Harbour and PEOPLE.

Bryce Dessner lives in France.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *TREMBLING EARTH*

Trembling Earth was first performed on 7 November 2025 at Dublin's National Concert Hall by cello soloist Anastasia Kobekina and the National Symphony Orchestra Ireland, conducted by André de Ridder. The score has a superscription from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: 'Some say the earth was feverous and did shake.' A sense of energy pervades the work, even in moments where the energy is latent rather than in full flow.

The cello opens the piece with a leaping figure of two two-note chords that outline the dissonant interval of the major seventh (G-F sharp, which can be, and in the piece often is, sounded as a semitone). The cello introduces several motifs that will recur, including repeated sextuplet arpeggios across a wide spectrum and rapid alternation of high harmonics.

The major seventh motif moves to lower brass then woodwind, the strings join in with fast staccato semiquavers and siren sounds.

This material is passed around the ensemble, before the cello moves into a slower-moving theme against a flute duet with harmonics from violins and a cello duet with oboe.

The cello is given a lengthy solo passage with occasional interpolations, and the opening leaping figure leads unexpectedly to a long-held soft string chord of G minor.

A pointillistic texture from woodwinds gradually slows, introducing more string chords, over which a very high cello line sings successively with solo winds, a violin and another cello.

Soft muted brass, chilled with tuned percussion chords, supports a new theme for cello that rises from its deepest C through wide intervals into an elaborate solo episode.

There follows a very gentle, rocking ostinato in slow triplets, over treading bass in crotchets and a new simple lyrical theme from cello, the texture gradually blurred by low shimmers in woodwind; this in turn leads into a very slow section of diaphanous string sheen, with the soloist making swooping slow glissandos over distantly thrumming timpani – even here the energy is still apparent. The strings take up

the glissando figures, as the cello returns to the sextuplet motif against a broad romantic melody that gleams in the flute, clarinet, trumpet and violins.

A new section is characterised the drier sounds of col legno (where the strings use the wood, rather than the hair, of the bow) and the marimba, with rising tremolo figures from the cello, terse short chords form the orchestra and lots of untuned percussion.

Plunging woodwinds introduce a passage for the cello, which leads to an enormous build-up of energy. This releases motoric rhythms and the occasional military motif; harps and marimba take up the motoric rhythms to enable the cello to soar in long notes above, and as the rest of the orchestra joins in the melody is doubled two octaves above by the violins.

A long-held pedal point in the bass offers some respite with fragmentary motifs from cello and winds. Motoric rhythms return, though quietly at first and building in intensity before a solo cadenza and a lengthy, loud, energetic tutti.

The soloist, with woodwind and pizzicato string accompaniment begins the final section which features new metres such as 7/8, outlined in precise, short chords. An ornate solo line for cello brings the music back to 4/4 for the final run up to the work's emphatic conclusion.

Trembling Earth is scored for 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling cor anglais), 2 clarinets (2nd doubling bass clarinet) and 2 bassoons (2nd double contrabassoon); 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, strings and cello soloist.

It was first performed on 7 November 2025 at Dublin's National Concert Hall by Anastasia Kobekina (cello) and the National Symphony Orchestra Ireland, conducted by André de Ridder.

This is its Australian premiere.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *ST. CAROLYN BY THE SEA*

Commissioned by American Composers Orchestra and Muziekcentrum Eindhoven, and composed in 2011, the short concerto for two electric guitars, *St. Carolyn by the Sea*, is based on an episode in the book *Big Sur* by Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac. Dessner describes how:

Kerouac sits on the shore and sees his lover—a desperate creature—throwing herself into the sea. He thinks she’s going to drown, like Ophelia—that’s where Carolyn came from. I thought it was a beautiful image, dramatic. The piece kind of goes through the same intense mood swings and follows up on the drunken hallucinations that we find in the book.

The work’s first third is largely meditative, with what the composer calls ‘a slight romantic intensity about it’: full of ‘a kind of sweet longing’, it is lightly scored with short motifs and brief shimmers, with the antiphonal ringing for the two solo instruments. A timpani roll sets off faster ostinato figures that bring a sudden urgency to the music, underpinned by slower wave-like figures. The increasingly aggressive music finally gives way to a more lyrical section that quickly builds to what Dessner calls ‘obviously, a kind of triumphant ending.’

St. Carolyn by the Sea is scored for piccolo, flute, clarinet, bass clarinet and bassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets and 3 trombones; timpani, percussion, strings and 2 electric guitar soloists.

It was premiered on 22 October 2011 at Winter Garden in New York City, with the American Composer Orchestra conducted by George Manahan, with Bryce Dessner and his brother Aaron the soloists.

This is the first time the Sydney Symphony has performed the work.



A view of the California coastline at Big Sur.

Photo by David Iliff. License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT DVOŘÁK

As an impecunious 30-something composer, recently married and living on the modest salary of a church organist and freelance string playing, Dvořák benefited immensely from a growing sense among those in political power of responsibility to the arts. The local government, the Diet of Bohemia, had begun allocating part of its budget to arts funding through the newly founded Conservatory in Prague when Dvořák was young, and in the 1870s the Imperial Government in Vienna, through its Ministry of Public Education, made sums of money available in the form of fellowships or *stipendia* for young artists. With the backing of critic Eduard Hanslick and Johannes Brahms, Dvořák received financial support.

In 1877 Brahms wrote to his Berlin publisher, Simrock saying:

I have been receiving a lot of pleasure for several years past from the work of Anton Dvořák of Prague...Dvořák has written all kinds of things, operas (Czech), symphonies, quartets, piano pieces. He is certainly a very talented fellow. And incidentally, poor! I beg you to consider that!

Simrock was duly impressed with the young composer's work and commissioned a set of Slavonic Dances for piano duo. These, as Simrock had expected, were an instant hit, and again in their orchestral version. Simrock made a huge profit, and Dvořák's reputation spread rapidly in Europe, such that by 1879 his 'Slavonic' String Quartet had been premiered by the ensemble led by the great Joseph Joachim, and Hans Richter had commissioned the work we now know as his Sixth Symphony for Berlin.

As Brahms's letter shows, Dvořák was already a prolific composer, and by the time he was fifty, Dvořák was at the height of his creativity and fame. In the late 1880s he had travelled to Russia and England, where in 1884 he conducted his works at the Albert Hall, St James's Hall and the Crystal Palace in London (on the back of this his Requiem was composed for the Birmingham Festival); he had been showered with Imperial honours



Dvořák in 1882. Source: Gallica Digital Library (digital ID btv1b8417521d)/Wikimedia Commons.

and honorary doctorates, and was about to become the founding head of the new National Conservatory in New York. The works of this period in his life show his life-long love of a 'national' music, while making significant experiments in form and structure, particularly in chamber music. Always remaining, as he said, a 'humble Czech musician', Dvořák believed that:

nothing must be too low or insignificant for the musician. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or blind organ grinder...it is a sign of barrenness which such characteristic bits of music exist and are not heeded by the learned musicians of the age.

In the USA, Dvořák argued passionately for a national music that included elements and Native American and Black cultures, saying 'undoubtedly the germs for the best in music lie hidden among all the races that are commingled in this great country.'

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT DVOŘÁK'S EIGHTH SYMPHONY

The success that Dvořák enjoyed, thanks to Brahms's advocacy in the late 1870s, made his name beyond Vienna and Prague, and in 1883 he made the first of eight visits to England where his music became – and remained – extremely popular. In 1890, now a regular visitor, Dvořák arrived with the score his Eighth Symphony (published originally as No.4), which he had recently premiered in Prague but which for some time was colloquially known as the 'English Symphony'.

In fact the piece has, even for Dvořák, an especially Bohemian accent; its immediate popularity with the British audience perhaps has more to do with its relaxed attitude to the formal rigours of Germanic symphonism, and an abundance of memorable, folk-inflected melody. For Brahms, normally a great supporter, this was a major flaw. He argued (offering, in passing, a seriously backhanded compliment to his rival Anton Bruckner) that:

too much that's fragmentary, incidental, loiters about in the piece. Everything fine, musically captivating and beautiful – but no main points! When one says of Dvořák that he fails to achieve anything great and comprehensive with his pure, individual ideas, this is correct. Not so with Bruckner, all the same he offers so little.

In fact, the formal freedom and melodic richness are precisely what makes this work special. According his early biographer, Otakar Šourek, Dvořák aimed 'to write something different from his other symphonies and shape the musical content of his ideas in a new manner'. He did so not by piling up beautiful incidents, as Brahms suggests, though; as he is said to have told his student, Josef Michl 'to have a beautiful idea is nothing special. The idea comes from itself and if it is beautiful and great, man can take no credit for that. But to develop the idea well and make something great from it, that is the most difficult, that is – art!'

While the Symphony is a work of absolute music, it was composed in close proximity to a series of concert overtures originally known as *Nature*, *Life and Love* – the more customary titles *In Nature's Realm*, *Carnival* and *Othello* came later. This triptych shows Dvořák's essential Romanticism in his adherence to the cult of Nature and his delight in celebrating his ethnic musical roots, and in similar musical language to that of the Eighth Symphony.

The first movement is in G major and marked *Allegro con brio*, but Dvořák disguised both speed and tonality by beginning with a slow-moving minor-mode melody in the cellos, richly doubled by horn, clarinet and bassoon. When the music makes it to the home key of G major it is with a chirping melody for the flute. In a breathtaking display of orchestration, that ranges from translucent shimmering to the richness of divided viola and cellos, Dvořák elaborates his themes through an audacious series of key changes; the conventional recapitulation is here a shining G major chord with the flute melody now given to a more introspective cor anglais. The *Adagio* in C minor, is often brightened with rapid, falling major scales like pealing bells, and has an impassioned central section. The scherzo begins with a lyrical G minor dance contrasting with a more buoyant E minor trio and fast coda. The finale is a set of variations on the bright fanfare announced by the trumpet as the movement opens.

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What Brahms, of all people, failed to hear in this music is how the varying episodes, across the movements, are unified by pervasive rhythmic cells. The long-short-short figure with which the work opens also dominates the slow movement's main theme. Groups of four repeated even notes – crotchets or quavers – appear at structural points; groups of triplets can appear as distant drum taps, or the opening gesture of an important melody (like the *Adagio*'s) and be transformed into the three note up-beat of the third movement; the dotted rhythm of the third movement's trio is transmuted in the rhythm of the fourth movement's fanfare, and when that theme is stated by the orchestra its rising arpeggio reveals it to be related to the flutes theme from the first movement. This almost subliminal motific manipulation gives coherence to some of Dvořák's most expansive and poetic music.

**Notes by Gordon Kerry © 2005 (Ligeti),
© 2013 (Dvořák)**



Dvořák with his wife Anna in London, 1886

Dvořák's symphony is scored for 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling cor anglais), 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani and strings.

It was premiered on 2 February 1890 in Prague, with Dvořák conducting the Orchestra of the National Theatre.

The Sydney Symphony first performed the work on 19 August 1941, conducted by Montague Brearley.

Other notable performances include those conducted by Walter Susskind (1946 & 55), Eugene Goossens (1954), Walter Stiasny (1965 & 71), Michael Gielen (1966), Moshe Atzmon (1971), Louis Frémaux (1975), Hiroyuki Iwaki (1977 & 90), Franz-Paul Decker (1980), Günther Herbig (1987), Christopher Seaman (1997), Carlo Rizzi (2000), Emmanuel Villaume (2002), Arvo Volmer (2006), Antonello Manacorda (2013) and Bramwell Tovey (2017).

Our more recent performances were on our 2022 Regional Tour to Newcastle, Tamworth, Port Macquarie, Griffith, Wagga Wagga and Canberra, conducted by Roger Benedict.

Of particular note are performances in 1979, led by the Uruguayan conductor José Serebrier, which were recorded and released on RCA. This performance is available on streaming.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH BRYCE DESSNER

Composer and guitarist Bryce Dessner is one of the most interesting characters in all of music, from his success with rock band The National to his celebrated compositional career. He discusses inspirations, collaborations and his excitement at finally performing with the Sydney Symphony.

By Hugh Robertson

If you were to compile a list of the most interesting musicians of the 21st century, Bryce Dessner would surely be close to the top. Best-known as a founding member of indie-rock legends The National, Dessner has spent 25 years crafting ten albums of propulsive, arresting and captivating soundscapes alongside his twin brother Aaron and their bandmates.

Perhaps less well-known is that Dessner is originally a classically trained composer and musician, and this part of his career would be the envy of any: working closely with major organisations and individuals including Carnegie Hall, Kronos Quartet, Katia and Marielle Labèque, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York City Ballet and many more besides, writing everything from works for solo instruments to chamber pieces

and works for orchestra. Just last year Dessner received his first Academy Award nomination for his score to the film *Train Dreams*, and separately was invited to be the Czech Philharmonic's first-ever Composer in Residence in its 130-year history.

Dessner has also had an especially close relationship with Australia, working with both Sydney Dance Company and the Australian Chamber Orchestra on several projects over the years – but this month marks his first collaboration with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

After waiting so long for the stars to align we wanted to make the most of it, and so we are presenting two unique programs showcasing the full breadth of Dessner's talents as both composer and instrumentalist. First, an

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orchestral program featuring the Australian premiere of a brand-new cello concerto, together with Dessner as soloist in an older work, *St. Carolyn by the Sea*. Then we get to experience Dessner at close quarters, together with a smaller group of our string musicians, performing at City Recital Hall and touring to Melbourne Recital Centre for the first time in many years.

We are not the only ones excited by the breadth of the collaboration.

‘I’m super excited to come and work with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra finally – it’s a big honour’, says Dessner via video call from his home in the south of France. ‘I think Australia is one of the most dynamic cultural landscapes: the audience is incredible, there is very vibrant art scene in many different places.

‘It’s also wonderful to be able to present pieces of different scale,’ he continues. ‘A couple of large orchestral works and then some chamber works across the two weeks that I’ll be there. It’s really an interesting experience for me to have that kind of conversation with the musicians, and to make the music that intuitively comes to me.’

A NEW CELLO CONCERTO

The centrepiece of Dessner’s trip is *Trembling Earth*, a brand-new cello concerto written specifically for Anastasia Kobekina, a firecracker of a young soloist.

‘I met Anastasia in the studio,’ recalls Dessner. ‘Sony recommended Anastasia to play a solo piece of mine called *Tuusula* for a recent album of mine called *Solos*. She showed up a couple summers ago, never having met me and played this piece – and it was just unbelievable. We became quite good friends after that and it has developed into a really collaborative, important relationship for me.’

‘She is an unbelievable musician,’ he continues. ‘She is one of the most open-minded musicians and a brilliant virtuoso, but beyond that, she’s someone that brings a lot to her music making. It is really quite profound.’

For her part, Kobekina still can’t believe it has all happened, even though she has already performed the piece a handful of times in Dublin, Prague and Berlin before bringing it to Sydney.

‘I love his writing, and his writing for cello is so masterful,’ she says, fizzing with excitement. ‘He would send me WhatsApp messages with a motif he was thinking about and ask me to improvise on it, and then I would just fiddle around with them. But through the collaboration, through moments that we shared in the studio recording his music, he got to know my style of playing and the way I play cello. And that is so much applied to the piece.

‘It feels like a perfect suit, like it was tailored for me. It just feels so good to play this music.’

Dessner shares Kobekina’s excitement.

‘Anastasia is a young woman who’s really empowered, and approaches music with an open heart. That’s part of what’s been really touching about working with her...But more than [anything] it’s her lyrical playing: she really sings with the cello. That was part of what was new for me with this piece – the concerto has very lyrical passages, which were inspired just by listening to her.’

INSPIRED BY EDVARD MUNCH

One never knows when inspiration will strike, and in this case catalyst was the artwork of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.

‘The title *Trembling Earth* actually comes from a painting exhibition I saw in Oslo, at the Edvard Munch museum,’ Dessner reveals. ‘We know Munch from his existential paintings that have become so popular, like *The Scream*, but most of his output was landscape painting, often without any human forms.

‘The paintings in this exhibition were just profound, old oak forests painted in a surrealist way. They were full of beauty, but also angst and poetic imagery. I found it really moving.’

‘I also felt a connection to the times we’re living in, which are extremely difficult and traumatic and full of conflict and ominous things. Something about nature bearing witness to human calamity and catastrophe and the end of time. I didn’t necessarily want to write a political work but obviously I’m influenced by the times we’re in.’

Dessner says that he also took inspiration from the very idea of an orchestra itself.

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‘The orchestra as this great human archetype that in a way, exists outside of time,’ he says. ‘The sound can feel extremely modern, or very ancient, or of the 19th century, but something about it is timeless and remains – just like landscape painting or Greek tragedy – one of these eternal forms that we never really tire of and that seem to reinvent themselves over time.’

One of the great challenges with a new piece of music is what do you perform alongside it? Well, as conductor Umberto Clerici points out, there are some musical connections to the other works in the concert: Dessner’s *St. Carolyn by the Sea*, Dvořák’s Eighth Symphony and György Ligeti’s *Concert Românesc*.

‘There is a red line running through this concert, which is the connection between us as humans and nature,’ Clerici says. ‘Dvořák wrote this symphony quite late in his life, from his garden, where he found peace and inspiration. So it’s a bucolic euphoria of a symphony: everything is seen through the lens of a composer that looks at the wonder of the world and really is joyful about living in it.’

‘Ligeti is similar: he takes all these folk melodies from Transylvania, his homeland. Then *St. Carolyn by the Sea* is inspired by a novel by the famous Beat author Jack Kerouac, called *Big Sur*, where the protagonist – who is a literal alter-ego of the writer – looks for respite from living in the city and his problem related to alcoholism and mental health.

‘So all the way through there is this leitmotif of what nature is for us as humans. So the prism, the lens is *from us*. It’s not nature in general, it’s nature from a human perspective.’



Munch’s *The Yellow Log* (1912). Source: Munch Museum.

CLASSICAL’S CONNECTION TO POP AND FOLK MUSIC

One other intriguing throughline in this concert is the connection to popular music. Dvořák was famous for taking folk tunes from his native Bohemia and transforming them into orchestral music, Ligeti does the same in this early concerto. Of course, we aren’t going to hear quotes from songs by The National in Dessner’s orchestral works, but he acknowledges it’s impossible to completely separate the music that he composes into neat, discrete genres.

‘Many of the composers I love were great songwriters: Schumann, Schubert or Mahler,’ says Dessner. ‘Dvořák wrote famous American tunes that eventually found their way into American folklore and vice versa. Stravinsky and Bartók are probably the biggest influences on me, and they were deeply indebted to folk music from their countries.’

‘I have a mixed background where I grew up playing folk music and eventually started bands with my brother and it’s integral to what I do. There aren’t tunes in my pieces as far as quotes from rock songs or folk songs or something, but there are maybe certain approaches to the percussion writing or, some of the rhythmic ideas in the string writing. I was really born out of both worlds: I grew up playing flute and learned classical music first, I did advanced studies in classical music at Yale, but then pretty much had bands since I was in my teenage years.’

‘I am one musician and it’s all part of who I am.’

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