

BRYCE DESSNER & THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY

24 SEPTEMBER 2026

City Recital Hall, Sydney

25 SEPTEMBER 2026

Melbourne Recital Centre



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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.

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2026 CONCERT SEASON

BRYCE DESSNER &
THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY

A PORTRAIT IN MUSIC

BRYCE DESSNER electric guitar
SAM WELLER conductor
VATCHE JAMBAZIAN piano
MUSICIANS OF THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

All music composed by BRYCE DESSNER (born 1976)

Aheym (2009)
Lachrimae (2012)
Garcia Counterpoint (2015)

Music from the film *Train Dreams* (2025)
Selections to include:
A Faint Understanding
Flood Stories
Passageways IV: Still Waiting
Kate, Returned
The Great Mystery
Impermanence Suite (2020)

Thursday 24 September, 7pm
City Recital Hall, Angel Place
Classics in the City
Friday 25 September, 7.30pm
Melbourne Recital Centre

Pre-concert talk
By Paige Gullifer at 6.15pm
(Thursday only)

Estimated durations
This concert will run for
approx. 90 minutes, with
no interval

Cover image
Photo by Shervin Lainez

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Photo by Jens Koch

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

BRYCE DESSNER composer and guitar

Bryce Dessner is a vital and rare force in new music. He is an Oscar-nominated composer and has won Grammy Awards for his work in classical music, with his band The National and for his 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 presence in film score composition, with credits including Clint Bentley's *Train Dreams* and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* with the late Ryuichi Sakamoto.

In 2027 Dessner presents his major new opera, *Herakles Mad*, in collaboration with author Anne Carson and visual artist Ragnar Kjartansson. Based on Carson's book, *H of H Playbook*, the opera takes a contemporary look at Greek tragedy *Herakles*, by 5th century BC poet Euripides, and explores the equally contemporary themes of patriarchy, toxic masculinity, war and redemption. Co-commissioned by Theater Basel, LA Philharmonic, English National Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago, the world premiere takes place in Basel in May 2027.

Dessner also premieres a second important staged work in 2027, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, based on the ground-breaking book of poetry by Ocean Vuong. Further details on the world premiere and subsequent performances will be announced.

In the 2026-27 season there will be two album releases of large works by Dessner, firstly from violinist Pekka Kuusisto who, as global champion of the work, pairs Dessner's Violin Concerto with a series of pieces inspired by the concerto, co-written with Dessner and produced by the likes of Sufjan Stevens and Jon Hopkins (Sony Music, autumn 2026). Secondly, pianist Alice Sara Ott releases Dessner's Piano Concerto – herself the dedicatee of the work – plus solo piano works from *Love Icebox*, the conceptually staged program based on excerpts of the letters from John Cage to Merce Cunningham (Deutsche Grammophon, spring 2027). Dessner, Ott and French actress Isabelle Huppert premiered *Love, Icebox* at Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton in December 2025 and the work will receive its UK premiere at London's Barbican in March 2027.

Further highlights of the season include Dessner's artist residency with Sydney Symphony in September, which will see multiple works of his performed as well as Dessner appearing with the orchestra. Dessner also performs in concerts to celebrate Steve Reich's 90th birthday, including at New York's Carnegie Hall, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie and the Philharmonie de Paris.

Meanwhile Dessner's high level film and TV soundtrack collaborations continue with a major new film for Netflix by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles, with whom Dessner previously worked on *The Two Popes*. Dessner has also scored the forthcoming film, *A Statement*, by Oscar winner Tom McCarthy and which premiered at the New York Film Festival.

The 2025-26 season included composer residencies at Konzerthaus Berlin and with Czech Philharmonic, world premieres including that of his *Cello Concerto*, plus the soundtrack release to *Train Dreams* (Netflix). The score's title song, co-written by Dessner and Nick Cave, received an Academy Award nomination in 2026 for Best Original Song.

Also in 2025 Dessner was the recipient of the Samuel Beckett Gold Medal from Trinity College Dublin, recognising his outstanding contribution to public discourse through the arts.

Dessner's previous albums include: *Solos* (Sony Classical), showcasing his collection of solo instrumental pieces in collaboration with some of the world's leading musicians; *El Chan* and *St. Carolyn by the Sea* (both on Deutsche Grammophon); *Aheym*, commissioned by Kronos Quartet; *Tenebre*, an album of his works for string orchestra 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 program 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 currently co-curates the festivals *Sounds from a Safe Harbour* and *PEOPLE Berlin*, which returns for a new edition in October 2026.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

SAM WELLER conductor

Originally from Australia, Sam Weller was one of six 'designated winners' of the International Conducting Competition Rotterdam 2025, which saw him conduct ensembles such as the Rotterdam Philharmonic, Klangforum Wien and Orchestra of the 18th Century.

Sam is enjoying a blossoming career in The Netherlands and Australia with recent debuts including the Tasmanian, Queensland and West Australian Symphonies and conducting Opera Australia's 70th anniversary gala concert in Melbourne. Recently he also returned to the Adelaide Symphony and Noord Nederlands Orkest. In the past Sam has led performances with The Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, PHION, Phil Zuid and a national tour of *Die Zauberflöte* with Opera2Day and LUDWIG Orchestra.

Coming up Sam will return to the Royal Conservatoire, Den Haag to conduct performances of Britten's *War Requiem* and, in 2027, he will lead the Melbourne run of Opera Australia's production of *The Magic Flute*.

Sam founded Ensemble Apex in 2016, which has been hailed as 'one of the most exciting new ensembles on the Sydney scene' (*Limelight Magazine*). The orchestra creates exceptional orchestral music experiences for newcomers and seasoned concert-goers alike.



Photo by Wouter le Duc

Apex has presented sold-out seasons since 2016, with highlights including Bela Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin* at Sydney Town Hall, *Rhapsody in Blue* with Simon Tedeschi, Strauss's *Eine Alpensinfonie* and most recently a critically acclaimed production of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*. In 2024 they launched Apex Festival supported by the Australian Government – a cutting edge new orchestral music festival in Australia.

In 2022 Sam graduated from the prestigious National Masters of Orchestral Conducting in The Netherlands where he studied with Ed Spanjaard, Jac Van Steen, Kenneth Montgomery OBE and guest professor Antony Hermus.

Sam is a guest lecturer and conductor at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Conservatorium van Amsterdam and Koninklijk Conservatoire - Den Haag.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

VATCHE JAMBAZIAN piano

Australian pianist Vatche Jambazian is a graduate of The Juilliard School, where he completed his Master of Music following studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He has performed as a soloist and chamber musician throughout Australia, North America, Europe and Asia, appearing at venues including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Sydney Opera House, Melbourne Recital Centre, UKARIA and City Recital Hall Angel Place. His performances have been featured on WQXR Radio New York and ABC Classic.

Jambazian has collaborated with artists, ensembles and orchestras including Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Omega Ensemble, Australian Youth Orchestra, Nexas Quartet, Flinders Quartet and Orava Quartet, as well as Umberto Clerici, Andrew Haveron, David Greco, Lauren Fagan, Hyung Suk Bae, Emma McGrath, David Elton and Mayaan Licht. His repertoire spans the piano and chamber music canon, alongside a strong commitment to contemporary music.

He has premiered works by composers including Philip Glass, Caroline Shaw, Kaija Saariaho, Ross Edwards, Elena Kats-Chernin, Lachlan Skipworth, Andrew Howes, Alex Turley and Holly Harrison.

Jambazian has been featured in festivals including the Sydney Festival, Adelaide Festival, Bangalow Music Festival, Adelaide Hills Summer Festival, Orange Festival and the Bowral Autumn Music Festival, where he has been Artistic Director since 2023. His other appointments include Principal Pianist of Omega Ensemble, and Lecturer in Piano at the Australian Institute of Music.



Photo by Veronica Evans

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *AHEYM* (HOMEWARD)

AheyM was composed in 2009 to a commission from the Kronos Quartet for the Celebrate Brooklyn Festival. It was premiered on 12 March 2009 at the MusicNOW Festival and 18 July 2009 at Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

AheyM, as Dessner writes:

means 'homeward' in Yiddish, and this piece is written as a musical evocation of the idea of flight and passage. 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). She could only give us a smattering of details, but they all found their way into our collective imagination, eventually becoming a part of our own cultural identity and connection to the past. In her poem *Di rayze aheyM*, the American-Yiddish poet Irena Klepfisz, a professor at Barnard in New York and 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 my grandmother, Sarah Dessner.

Dessner evokes 'flight and passage' in a language that we might call post-minimalist, which creates and maintains momentum out of an unwavering pulse and the repetition of motivic cells, but which allows for thematic development, and the expressive possibilities of goal-directed harmony and dynamic contrast. Its metre, 5/4, ensures that the constant pulse is never quite predictable, and the work falls into clearly defined contrasting sections. The opening section hammers out short, repeated-note figures in rhythmic unison and high volume, like a locomotive engine at full speed. The second section features a simple, quiet cello melody, punctuated at first by plucked chords from the higher instruments, which wends its way through the texture as an insistent five-note rhythm gradually suffuses the instrumental parts. This is a feature of the work: ideas such as this are introduced in one voice and

gradually displace the prevailing material, changing like the landscape seen from a train window. The music thus subtly introduces, develops and combines rattling col legno motifs, icy harmonics, chorale-like fragments and, finally, brilliant arpeggiations that lead to the works frenzied final pages.

ABOUT *LACHRIMAE*

The composer writes:

Lachrimae is a direct reference to John Dowland's work of the same name. I had played that piece in school on guitar and decided that I wanted to base something on it. The Renaissance composer Dowland himself adapted the piece several times into different versions and there's also a Benjamin Britten composition based on the same piece of music, so that was part of my inspiration. When I wrote my work I was listening to string orchestra music and I think Bartók's *Divertimento* is the pinnacle of string writing. So the piece is kind of equally inspired by Dowland's *Lachrimae* and by Bartók's *Divertimento*.

ABOUT *GARCIA COUNTERPOINT*

This work for electric guitar and pre-recorded track was commissioned by Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam for Cross-Linx 2015, supported by the AMMODO Foundation. It is based on the transcription of a Jerry Garcia solo and inspired by Steve Reich.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *TRAIN DREAMS*

Train Dreams is the third film by Clint Bentley on which Bryce Dessner has worked, the others being *Jockey* and *Sing Sing*. Released in 2025, the film is based on a novella by Denis Johnson, and features Joel Edgerton as the central character Robert Grainier whose 80-year life it depicts. As Mikael Wood in the *Los Angeles Times* notes:

we watch as he cuts down logs in the forest, as he nurtures a romantic relationship and becomes a father, as he returns home one day to a nightmarish discovery from which he never quite recovers. A stirring meditation on work, love, nature and grief, the film doesn't contain much dialogue — critics have compared it to the movies of Terrence Malick — which means that Dessner's gently rippling chamber-folk music is an almost equal partner to the images in the storytelling.

Speaking to *Billboard*, Dessner said that there is 'a feeling of light and dark in the film which I tried to access in the music, balancing the heavier more intense moments with moments of levity and lighter sounds.' This concert suite for piano and chamber music contains five extracts from the score.

'A Faint Understanding' is marked 'delicate, mysterious', its long held, muted chords releasing liquid arpeggios from the piano answered by more active rhythm from the strings.

'Flood Stories' is characterised by a melody that leaps up through wide intervals.

'Passageways IV – Still waiting' is one of several statements of a main theme, which Dessner notes:

comes back four or five times throughout the film in different moments and iterations. The emotion in this music is lyrical but halting, like an aria that never really fully reaches completion. This idea is mirrored in the minimalism of the film, which is beautifully restrained.

In the film, Grainier's daughter Kate disappeared as a child; 'Kate, Returned' refers to an incident in which a young adult woman appears, injured, who might be she.

'The Great Mystery' is full of driving ostinato rhythms, often overlaying repeated patterns of three and four beat to create a nervous instability.

ABOUT *IMPERMANENCE*

Sydney Dance Company's full-length work, Rafael Bonachela's *Impermanence*, appeared in 2021 and was described as 'a visceral and thrilling exploration of the juxtaposition of beauty and devastation.'

Bryce Dessner was 'initially inspired by the tragedy of the Australian bushfires and the Notre-Dame fire in Paris'. The music was commissioned by the Australian String Quartet and Sydney Dance Company, assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

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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.

FEATURE ARTICLE

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.

‘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. And Sydney being one of the most vibrant – it’s just a wonderful place to come perform. I’ve had the privilege of visiting many times and actually spending quite a bit of time over the years so it’s super exciting for me to come down and perform in September.’

Dessner’s extraordinary range will be on full display in tonight’s concert. He will perform works from across his career, each with their own significance and history, alongside the Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s string musicians.

Three of the works have a strong connection to Sydney. *Aheym* and *Tenebre* were adapted by Rafael Bonachela for the Sydney Dance Company and their Helpmann Award-winning ballet *Frame of Mind*, while *Impermanence* was commissioned by the Australian String Quartet and SDC and inspired by the Australian bushfires and the Notre-Dame fire in Paris.

There won’t be any dancers on stage in these performances, though Dessner points out they will be with us in spirit. ‘They weren’t written originally for dance, actually – that said, my sister is a dancer and a lot of the first classical pieces I heard were going to the Cincinnati Ballet, and a lot of the early commissions that I had were writing dance scores for my sister. So all of my music feels like it’s written for dance in a way.’

Another early influence was the English Renaissance composer John Dowland (c.1563–1626), a renowned lute player and singer; as a young classical guitarist Dessner played a lot of Dowland, and his *Lachrimae* is inspired by a Dowland song of the same name. And *Garcia Counterpoint* is equally inspired by two major figures in Dessner’s musical life.

‘*Garcia Counterpoint* is a solo guitar piece that I wrote as a kind of tribute to Steve Reich,’ Dessner reveals. ‘*Electric Counterpoint* is the electric guitar piece that Reich wrote in the 80s that I played a lot – and I’m touring it with him this year as part of his 90th birthday. *Garcia Counterpoint* is equal parts tribute to Steve Reich and then Jerry Garcia, the mythological folkloric figure, singer and guitar player of The Grateful Dead who died quite young and was a huge influence on generations of musicians.

‘It is basically my transcriptions of little lines from of his guitar solos, that I then kind of create a collage-like piece in the style of [Reich’s] *Electric Counterpoint*. It’s two things that kind of don’t belong together, but somehow it works.’

Rounding out this journey through Dessner’s career and influences is a selection of music from his score to *Train Dreams*, which saw him nominated for an Academy Award earlier this year. It is an exquisite film, spare and melancholy and tender, chronicling the life of a man (Joel Edgerton) living and working in America’s northwest in the second half of the 19th century, and Dessner’s score does much to set the tone of the film.

It’s proof that, more than 25 years into a wide-ranging career, Dessner is still growing and exploring what music can be.

A close-up photograph of a man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit, playing a double bass. He is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The background is a solid, vibrant yellow. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of his hair, beard, and the wood of the instrument.

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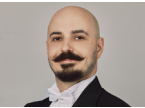
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