

Bryce Dessner

This busy US composer successfully straddles two very different musical worlds and loves to collaborate, finds **Jonathan Shipley**

Behind Vatican walls, two popes sit in a courtyard. They talk quietly, in hushed tones, intimately, as perhaps a classical guitar might sound on a warm piazza in a twilight neighbourhood of Buenos Aires.

In Cincinnati, the rock group The National plays to a home town crowd. It is raucous, sweaty, ebullient, thrilling, loud. The guitarist on stage hears the song he wrote sung back to him by a chorus of thousands in the audience.

Both pieces of music – the papal strums and the rocking thrums – come from one man: Bryce Dessner, who has his musical identity firmly planted in both classical music and rock, all the while bestriding them to create his own brand of boundary-pushing music. Known worldwide for being a member of the Grammy-winning rock band The National, he is also known for his orchestral, chamber and vocal compositions, commissioned by such organisations as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Kronos Quartet, Eighth Blackbird and New York City Ballet. His film score work includes Netflix's *The Two Popes* (2019; referred to above, and starring Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce) and *The Kitchen* (also 2019). In addition, he worked collaboratively on the Oscar-winning Leonardo DiCaprio film *The Revenant* (2015), whose score was Golden Globe- and Bafta-nominated. Add to that a 2015 Grammy for Best Chamber Music / Small Ensemble Performance with his piece *Murder Ballades* (2013) and it's clear that this composer is going places.

To say that Dessner combines elements of disparate genres to create one voice would be a disservice. He has a multitude of voices

Just in the last few years, Dessner's classical music output has included 'When We Are Inhuman' (released 2019), an album of contemporary classical arrangements of traditional folk and Bonnie 'Prince' Billy songs; 'El Chan' (2019), an album of piano pieces that range from minimal to rousing; and *Impermanence/Disintegration* (2020), a composition created for the Sydney Dance Company and played by the Australian Quartet.

For Dessner, it all started with the flute when he was a child. Actually, before that, even: when he listened to his father's jazz music. 'My dad was a jazz drummer in the 1960s,' says Dessner. 'We listened to Keith Jarrett, Charles Lloyd, Pat Metheny.' Surrounded by jazz and what was on the radio (all kinds of music, from 1960s folk to Sonic Youth), young Dessner began developing a rather eclectic musical taste, which would serve him well later in life.

Dessner gave up the flute for the guitar and began discovering classical music. The music of Bach riveted him. Music from the Renaissance spoke to him – Baroque music, too. But it was his first encounter with famed minimalist



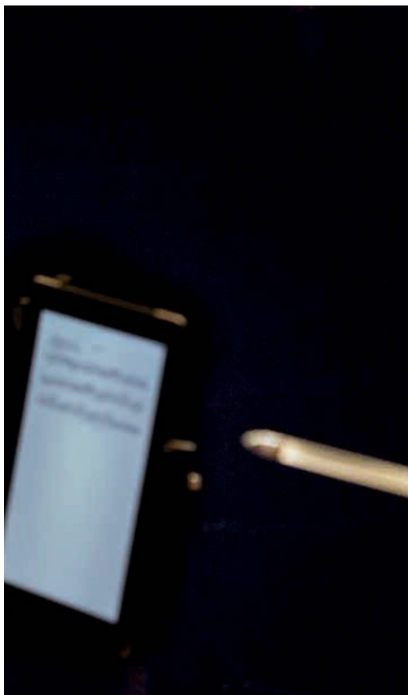
Unhindered by Covid, Dessner has been hard at work on some ambitious projects

composer Steve Reich that changed the way he thought about music. 'It felt exciting. Reich. Brian Eno, too. Their music was different from anything that I knew.' (His admiration for Reich would later be reciprocated – Reich has spoken of Dessner's 'importance' as a composer, hailing his 'developed technique' and 'intense emotional voice', and describing him as 'a major voice of his generation'.)

And so began a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, he was playing in rock bands. The National formed in 1999. At the time, Dessner was not a member, it was just his twin brother Aaron, brothers Bryan and Scott Devendorf and lead singer Matt Berninger. Their self-titled debut album (on which Bryce was an additional musician) hit in 2001, after which Dessner joined the band. Several albums followed, and now they're ramping up to work on their ninth in the studio.

On the other hand, Dessner was pursuing classical composition. He earned both his bachelor's and his master's degrees in music at Yale University. He founded the Cincinnati-based MusicNOW Festival in 2006, co-founded Copenhagen's Haven Festival and continues to co-curate the festival Sounds from a Safe Harbour, which takes place in the city of Cork. These festivals celebrate new music in its myriad forms. He co-founded the Brassland record label and is also a founder member of the improvisational, mostly instrumental, group Clogs, whose members met in the late 1990s and include Padma Newsome, Rachael Elliott and Thomas Kozumplik. In 2018, Dessner was named one of eight creative and artistic 'collaborative partners' with the San Francisco Symphony. He currently lives in France with his wife, Mina Tindle, a French singer and instrumentalist.

To say that Dessner combines elements of disparate genres to create one voice, however, would be a disservice. He has a multitude of voices. 'I don't have an agenda,' he says. 'I want to take the audience on a journey.' And that journey often involves others – whether it be Sufjan Stevens, Philip Glass,



DESSNER FACTS

- 1976** Born April 23, in Cincinnati, Ohio
- 2001** Co-founds - with twin brother Aaron and Alec Hanley Bemis - the Brassland label, which releases early albums by The National, Doveman and Nico Muhly, among others
- 2015** Wins Grammy as a classical composer for Best Chamber Music / Small Ensemble Performance of *Murder Ballades* by Eighth Blackbird on their 'Filament' album
- 2017** Premiere of *Skrik Trio* (Steve Reich / Carnegie Hall commission) played by Pekka Kuusisto (violin), Nadia Sirota (viola), Nicolas Altstaedt (cello)
- 2017** Wins Grammy with The National for Best Alternative Music Album: 'Sleep Well Beast'
- 2019** Scores Fernando Meirelles's Netflix film *The Two Popes*, recorded with London Contemporary Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios, London

Paul Simon or Ragnar Kjartansson. 'The reason I do any of this', he says of being an artist, 'is to collaborate.'

Murder Ballades was commissioned by Eighth Blackbird and Lunapark. The seven short individual pieces are based on American folk ballads about murder and other morbid themes. The start of 'Omie Wise' is springy and sprightly with flute, clarinet and jaunty piano before the piece descends into a more chaotic drive towards a maelstrom of conflicting melodies, instruments see-sawing between other instruments, the piano crashing around like an injured bird. The last movement, 'Tears for Sister Polly', sounds like something from a 1940s noir crime B-movie. Picture something in black and white – the killer tiptoeing through a dark alley, rain just falling, police officers not far off.

Wires (2016), for electric guitar and chamber orchestra, was commissioned by Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw's NTR ZaterdagMatinee series. There is a sense of foreboding in the piece, as there is in many of Dessner's works. There is beauty, but there are also shades of malevolence. It is like a musical depiction of a 1930s grand hotel that's been abandoned for years: it's still lovely, but there is decay, and that decay, too, can be lovely, given the right shade and light.


Skrik Trio (2017) was commissioned by Steve Reich and Carnegie Hall for the Three Generations concert series in 2017. *Skrik* is 'scream' in Norwegian; Dessner wrote the piece inspired by several things, including Edvard Munch's famous painting and Yoko Ono's scream in response to the US election result in 2016. The trio starts and ends with a droning, interrupted by episodes of various rhythms and interplay between the instruments. How can art reshape the traumatic events in one's life? The piece explores that question.

Turning to the handful of soundtracks that Dessner has worked on, the music for *The Revenant*, written with Ryuichi Sakamoto and Alva Noto, is quiet and dark, coldly progressing

through sharp expanses of emptiness crystallised in simple long strokes of strings, punctuated with heart-thumping percussion. The music for *The Two Popes* is also quiet, but in a strikingly different way. While *The Revenant* whispers towards death, *The Two Popes* hums softly towards eternal life. There is a gentle glow to the music. It is other-worldly with deep splashes of colour. Old meets new in a marriage of simple melodies punctuated with the rich sounds of folk music.

On his most recent album, comprising the aforementioned *Impermanence/Disintegration*, the track titled 'Emergency' is emergent, pulse-quickening, propulsive and foreboding, whereas 'Impermanence' begins as a Max Richter-esque oasis of mellifluous calm before journeying to dramatic places. Dessner's love of American folk song is discernible as the movement reaches a feverish conclusion before returning to an aftermath of the softest strings.

The global pandemic hasn't stopped Dessner from creating: 'It's the first time in 20 years that I haven't been travelling. It's given me a chance to back up, gain a different perspective, ask myself what I want to do. It's been extraordinary, in that way.' He's been at work on some ambitious pieces. His Trombone Concerto was premiered last September. In his programme note he says, 'I have always loved the trombone and how flexible it is as an instrument.' His concert opener *Mari* (2020) was eventually premiered in June by the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, while his Violin Concerto (2020) will be premiered by Pekka Kuusisto in Frankfurt on October 1; soon afterwards, it will be performed in London, San Francisco and Paris.

Composing gives Dessner, he says, the opportunity to learn things about himself. Given that he works with such a wide array of musicians (taking in Taylor Swift, Jonny Greenwood, Kronos Quartet and Lavinia Meijer), there is never a moment when he isn't growing, thanks to his continual exposure to art and its artists. 'It's a joy to me to be a part of this,' he enthuses. 'It's an education, getting inside another artist's head.' 

DESSNER ON DISC

Featuring chamber and percussion works, and a film score



Murder Ballades

Eighth Blackbird

Cedille

The celebrated Chicago-based new-music sextet includes Dessner's *Murder Ballades* on this Grammy winner alongside shorter works by others - all premiere recordings; plus there's a concert performance of some Philip Glass.



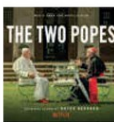
Music for Wood and Strings

Sö Percussion

Brassland

Dessner's second album (after 'Aheym') comprises his 35-minute *Music for Wood and Strings* (2013).

Each percussionist also has a chordstick, an instrument designed in collaboration with Dessner which is a cross between a hammer dulcimer and an electric guitar, giving the piece a unique soundscape between hum and roar.



The Two Popes - Music from the Netflix Film

London Contemporary Orchestra, et al

Milan

Dessner's score is beautiful and elegant, gorgeous and comforting, alongside needle drops by the likes of singer Mercedes Sosa, bandoneonist Dino Saluzzi and Ray Conniff and his Orchestra.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER HUNDERT