WAAPA Star Percussionists Bring Pulitzer Prize Winning Composer Steve Reich’s Masterpiece to Life

In the second-ever performance of this work in Western Australia, Defying Gravity presents ‘Drumming’, one of the iconic works of the 20th century by the great American minimalist composer Steve Reich.

Reich’s 1971 masterpiece is an exhilarating work that combines soaring melodies and powerful African rhythms to create an intricate web of colour, harmony and rhythm.

This uplifting and vibrant performance is directed by 2009 WAAPA Honours graduate Fiona Digney and features some of Australia’s star percussionists.

Digney has become a rising star of the Perth scene as a solo artist and regularly performs with the Australian Youth Orchestra as well as the West Australian Symphony Orchestra.

In this performance of Reich's masterpiece Digney will share her passion for Reich's music and guide the audience through the magical landscape that is ‘Drumming’.

This will be a rare opportunity to see Digney in performance before she heads to the United States to pursue a Master of Arts under master percussionist Morris Palter.

Grammy award winning Reich significantly influenced contemporary music, The Guardian describing him as “one of a handful of living composers who can legitimately claim to have altered the direction of musical history” and is considered one of America’s greatest living composers.

These two performances of ‘Drumming’ are sure to leave audiences in a state of total bliss as Defying Gravity bring Reich’s spellbinding masterpiece to life in a night of hypnotizing rhythm and sonic exploration.

Performance Information: Steve Reich’s Drumming
Thursday 20th May at 7.30pm.
Music Auditorium, WAAPA, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St, Mt Lawley.
Tickets are $22 full/$17 concession. Bookings through WAAPA Box Office on 9370 6636.

For further information or to discuss interview opportunities, please contact:
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Background Information

Defying Gravity: Now in its 23rd year, WAAPA’s award-winning Defying Gravity percussion ensemble creates a new world of sound - where sparkling rhythms and seductive melodies mix with an astonishing array of percussion instruments from around the globe. Formed by eighteen percussionists from WAAPA and UWA, Defying Gravity is one of Australia’s longest-established and most active new music ensembles, and has established a national following through its recordings and broadcasts for ABC Classic FM. Performing to sell-out audiences at its home WAAPA, Defying Gravity presents a vibrant selection of music combining melodic beauty with the overwhelming power of rhythm - and all the fun of ‘Stomp’!

The composer: One of the most important and influential composers of the twentieth century, Steve Reich was born in New York in 1936 and graduated from Cornell University with a philosophy degree before going on to study composition at the Juilliard School of Music. In 1961 he moved to California to work with composers Darius Milhaud and Luciano Berio, and in 1970 he travelled to Ghana to study African percussion with a master drummer from the Ewe tribe. Reich has also spent time immersed in the music of the Balinese gamelan. He is a leading exponent of the style of composition known as ‘systems music’ or ‘minimalism’, which typically invites the listener to focus upon sounds and repeated patterns which gradually evolve over time, slowly revealing their essence or beauty. ‘Drumming’ is Reich’s longest and perhaps most iconic work.

The music: ‘Drumming’ is a four movement minimalist work combining African dance rhythms and catchy melodies that can last anywhere between 55 and 75mins, with each of the four movements melding seamlessly into the next. ‘Drumming’ uses a compositional technique called ‘phasing’, which was first used by Reich in his early tape pieces. This technique, played in ‘Drumming’ on bongos, marimbas and glockenspiels, originated when Reich played two identical tape loops on analogue recorders. Due to the idiosyncrasies of the machines, one tape wound slightly faster than the other and resulted in the tapes becoming ‘out of phase’ with each other and eventually coming back into phase. The aural adventure that the listener experiences as the two parts diverge interested Reich greatly and influenced many of his later works including ‘Clapping Music’ and ‘Piano Phase’.

Composer Steve Reich writes: “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. ‘Drumming’ lasts from 55 to 75 minutes (depending on the number of repeats played) and is divided into four parts that are performed without pause. The first part is for four pairs of tuned bongo drums, stand-mounted and played with sticks; the second, for three marimbas played by nine players together with two women’s voices; the third, for three glockenspiels played by four players together with whistling and piccolo; and the fourth section is for all these instruments and voices combined.

I am often asked what influence my visit to Africa in the summer of 1970 had on ‘Drumming’. The answer is confirmation. It confirmed my intuition that acoustic instruments could be used to produce music that was genuinely richer in sound than that produced with electronic instruments, as well as confirming my natural inclination towards percussion (I became a drummer at the age of fourteen).

There is only one basic rhythmic pattern that underlies the whole of ‘Drumming’. 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.”

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