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Hisaishi conducts Hisaishi

Monday 23 November 2026, 7pm
Royal Albert Hall

Reich Music for Ensemble and Orchestra 20 mins

Lang mountain *UK premiere* 13 mins

Interval: 25 minutes

Hisaishi Concerto for Orchestra *UK premiere* 45 mins

Joe Hisaishi Composer/Conductor
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

ROYAL ALBERT HALL
Associate Orchestra at the **Royal Albert Hall**

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

– Hisaishi conducts Hisaishi –

Tonight's Music

Since being appointed as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's Composer-in-Association in 2024, world-renowned composer Joe Hisaishi has forged a remarkable international partnership with the Orchestra, bringing their music-making to audiences of tens of thousands in Seoul, Tokyo, Paris and London. Their collaboration has already included landmark performances at the Royal Albert Hall, among them the 2025 BBC Proms, where Hisaishi conducted his own *The End of the World* alongside Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*. We are delighted to welcome him back to London tonight to perform with the Orchestra once again in a programme that reflects both his artistic influences and personal connections.

We open with Steve Reich's *Music for Ensemble and Orchestra*, selected by Hisaishi to mark the Minimalist pioneer's recent 90th birthday. The first half also features the UK premiere of David Lang's *mountain*, a work by a composer Hisaishi greatly admires: 'David Lang is a personal friend of mine, and his *mountain* has been of great inspiration to me in recent times.' The concert concludes with Hisaishi's *Concerto for Orchestra*, co-commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and receiving its UK premiere tonight at the Royal Albert Hall after successful world premiere performances in the USA earlier this year.

Music for Ensemble and Orchestra (2018)

Steve Reich (b. 1936)

Sixteenths | Eighths | Quarters | Eighths | Sixteenths

We begin with a piece by a composer who has been a profound influence on Joe Hisaishi's approach to composition and is one of David Lang's most important musical models: Steve Reich, who celebrates his 90th birthday this year. Reich is a pioneering Minimalist, the first composer to experiment with using tape loops and mechanically-inspired repetitive musical processes to allow listeners (and players) to actually hear musical change unfolding in real time. And crucially, those musical processes don't actually need to be generated by recognisable instruments or singers: in fact, his first acknowledged piece, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), uses cuts and loops of part of a street preacher's sermon to draw the listener's ear to the music that lives in the rise and fall of impassioned speech. Reich's subsequent works turned discoveries made from working with tape recorders into complex playing techniques for acoustic musicians, playing with rhythms, regular beats, and unusual harmonies that shift over time. And in subsequent decades, he also made trips to Ghana, Indonesia and Israel to study different musical traditions and methods that have inspired his own work. No wonder his extraordinary output has not only influenced generations of classical musicians; it's also been much admired and referenced by David Bowie, Jonny Greenwood and The Orb.

Reich describes this 2018 composition as 'an extension of the Baroque Concerto Grosso' – which is to say that, rather than being a concerto for a single spotlit instrument, there are 20 players who feature as soloists, including string players, wind players, two pianists and two vibraphone players. Across its five movements, *Music for Ensemble and Orchestra* technically never changes speed, since Reich asks for the same pulse to be maintained throughout (and the music is performed continuously, without any breaks). But variety comes in the way that the beats are split from movement to movement. The outer movements, both headed *Sixteenths*, are bright and busy, with certain little dips and turns in the melody hinting at Bach or Vivaldi – and a certain anxious urgency in the finale, although this is

dispelled into feather-lightness by the music's end. In the second and fourth movements, *Eighths*, the propulsive chords of the piano are played only half as often, adding a greater sense of weightiness and allowing us to feel the music as a series of longer phrases. And at the work's centre, *Quarters*, forms a mysterious and still slower-pulsing core. The overall effect is one of moving from the spinning outer layers of something brightly-coloured and glinting in the sun, into its complex heart – and back out again into the light.

Discover more at **stevereich.com**

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mountain (2014)

UK premiere

David Lang (b. 1957)

Pulitzer prize-winning composer David Lang is a man who cares about words, theatre, and evocative imagery. As the co-founder of the New York musical festival Bang on a Can in 1987, he has long been committed to making contemporary music as widely accessible as possible to as broad an audience as he can. He has also written for numerous television and film projects, particularly the movies of Paolo Sorrentino (and received Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for his music for Sorrentino's *YOUTH* in 2015). Everything about his music speaks of an infinitely refined, distilled kind of writing that has been vividly described as 'spare and chiselled, ...a mix of minimalism, medievalism and sour-sweet pop harmonies' (*The Guardian*).

But among all the remarkable achievements and carefully-honed skills that Lang can claim, he freely admits that he has 'never been much of a nature guy.' Indeed, many of his pieces bear titles concerned with human actions and activities: *man made*, *the village detective* and *the wealth of nations*, to name but a few. (And don't be fooled by *sweet air* – the air in question is laughing gas, administered to his son on a trip to the dentist!) But there is an exception. 'Probably my favorite nature experience happened when our kids were young, when my wife and I rented a summer cottage in Vermont. It was a very modest place but there was a little balcony off the bedroom that looked right out on a mountain, and I would sit there for hours, staring at the view. I wasn't close enough to see any detail, or to differentiate among the plants or rocks or features, or to get my feet dirty... What impressed me so much about the view was how unchanging it was.'

mountain, composed in 2014, is Lang's musical meditation on the grandeur, strength and seemingly timeless nature of such rugged landscapes. Pounding orchestral gestures and pulsing string chords arrive only to break off almost immediately into silence, with occasional small harmonic or melodic adjustments next time they return. Gradually, long-held notes emerge from this series of punctuations, their rates of change even slower, each consisting of several instruments overlapping in turn to give the impression of a seamless whole (which makes it almost impossible to identify by ear alone which players we're listening to). So which is the 'real' speed of passing time? The massive, infrequent throbbing of the majority of the orchestra, or the spun-out single notes that float onwards? On the page, the passing held notes, falling neatly from one orchestral line to another, are also somehow visually suggestive of tectonic plates.

Around halfway through the piece, the horns step to the front of the texture with a broad open motif that sounds very similar to the opening bars of Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathrustra* – evocative of a different kind of rocky landscape courtesy of Stanley Kubrick, who used this very passage in the opening scene of the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. And these sounds join the rest, another layer moving at another speed, and a new way of hearing time passing.

mountain is not a piece about thematic development. Lang is, after all, a second-generation Minimalist, a decade younger than John Adams and 20 years the junior of Steve Reich. What we are encouraged

to listen to, particularly in view of the subject matter of this piece, is musical process and change. Are things shifting as the piece goes on? Does it feel as if those changes are happening quickly or slowly? It rather depends on how you listen to it. As Lang observes, the life of mountains 'seem eternal to us. Maybe it's useful for us occasionally to contemplate the eternal.'

Discover more at **davidlangmusic.com**

Interval

Concerto for Orchestra (2026)

UK premiere

Joe Hisaishi (b. 1950)

I | II | III | IV | V

There are few orchestral composers in the world whose music is as well-known and well-loved as Joe Hisaishi. From 1984 onwards, Hisaishi became a regular collaborator with the filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, founder of Studio Ghibli. In addition to many other film and TV projects, Hisaishi has also been composing occasional concert music works since the late 1990s; but from around 2004, when he became the first music director of the New Japan Philharmonic 'World Dream Orchestra', he has completed numerous large-scale orchestral pieces and conducted orchestras all over the world. And that distinctive soundworld – richly symphonic, bursting with colour and energy – is clearly detectable in many of his concert pieces.

There's one more thing you should know before we get to the final piece in tonight's programme. Between 2025 and 2026, Hisaishi earned three Guinness World Records – a testament to his enormous energy and global fame. He holds the records for most tickets sold by a classical composer at the Tokyo Dome in a single run (where the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra enjoyed performing with him); the longest residency by a classical composer at Radio City Music Hall in New York in a single run; and having the highest-selling classical run in the Hollywood Bowl. Which may explain why his new *Concerto for Orchestra*, receiving its UK premiere this evening, was co-commissioned by eleven international orchestras and organisations – namely the National Symphony Orchestra (Washington), Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall, Joe Hisaishi Foundation, Colorado Symphony, San Francisco Symphony, Orchestre de Paris, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and of course the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

The title of this piece has been used by several other distinguished figures of the past one hundred years or so: perhaps most famously Béla Bartók, whose *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1943 features a witty *Game of Pairs*, introducing the ensemble's wind players in a series of rather comical duets. Bartók's fellow Hungarian Zoltán Kodály had written his own *Concerto for Orchestra* a few years earlier, which plays with Baroque musical techniques; while the Polish composer Witold Lutosławski sealed his reputation as one of his country's most important composers with his *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1954, bouncing with folk music and colourful effects. Crucially, in all cases, this was a way of each composer writing neither a symphony nor a solo concerto: an opportunity to look at that oh-so-familiar and yet infinitely flexible ensemble, the orchestra, in an entirely different way. It's Reich's *Music for Ensemble and Orchestra* pushed to its maximal extreme: the concerto soloists are everyone in the orchestra.

This was something that evidently fascinated Hisaishi. He explains: 'Usually, composers develop a work by engaging both logical and intuitive imagination – deciding on themes that they wish to express

through the work and entire orchestra's forces. However, in the form used for my *Concerto for Orchestra* the orchestral members themselves become the primary focus of said expression. In other words, rather than using the orchestra to express something external, the orchestra itself becomes the subject of expression.

'At first, I too found this approach somewhat perplexing. But rather than presenting the form arbitrarily, my aim – like that found in the works of Bach and other Baroque composers – has been to pursue the pure motion of sound. Drawing on my experience conducting works such as Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*, I approached this composition with an awareness of the origins of Minimalist music. The first and third movements adopt a more contemporary rhythmic approach, while the second and fourth movements feature melodic solo passages for individual instruments. The final movement (which, as I write this note, I am still rushing to complete!) brings these elements together, thereby forming the overall structure of the work. The piece is a five-movement work of approximately 45 minutes.

'The work is extremely demanding to perform, which I am reflecting on considerably during the compositional process. However based on my experience conducting orchestras around the world, I have great faith in their high performance standards and sincerely hope that the orchestra members and audience alike will find enjoyment among the work's challenges.'

Discover more at **joehisaishi.com**

Notes by Katy Hamilton, edited by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, 2026

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