

# ANYOS member at 13, percussionist Colin Currie 'went solo' to achieve international success but returned to NYOS as patron

**T**he impact at that age was staggering – it was all so raw and exciting. I honestly think I still have dreams about it.” Edinburgh-born percussionist Colin Currie can hardly contain his excitement when he looks back to his first experiences with the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland. He joined in 1990, at the age of just 13.

Now, of course, he's one of the world's most exceptional and sought-after percussionists, a remarkable figure who's premiered dozens of new works, collaborated with composers and musicians across genres, and developed a particularly close musical partnership with composer Steve Reich (who described Currie's ensemble performances of his music as “the best I've ever heard”). What's uncanny, however, is just how much of Currie's glittering career was foreshadowed by his experiences in NYOS. And, of course, the extent to which NYOS served to kindle his musical passions.

“I didn't know much back then – I was very keen, but I was a blank slate,” Currie says of his 13-year-old self. But during his very first NYOS course, he found himself immersed in a brand new piece – A Glasgow Symphony by Edward McGuire. “It had a lot of percussion in it, and for me it was unbearably exciting. There was a section that was to do with shipbuilding in Glasgow, so I remember vividly having to play chains, rattling them to evoke the noise of the shipbuilding industry.”

Already at that early stage, Currie had developed a keen interest in the newest of new music, raiding Edinburgh's music library to seek out whispered-about scores by its high priests Boulez, Stockhausen and Elliott Carter. “But to actually interact with a piece, be part of its premiere, discuss things with the composer and have him involve you in artistic decisions – that was just amazing.”

His early encounter with McGuire was just the first of many similar meetings with composers throughout the percussionist's subsequent career. “It confirmed for me,” he continues, “that classical music with a new, contemporary slant – an orchestral experience with elements of new music – was ultimately what I wanted to be involved in.”

Current NYOS musicians talk of the astonishing intensity of the NYOS courses, and also of their supportive family atmosphere. If the 13-year-old Currie met a new family, however, it was primarily one of senior siblings. “I remember meeting lots of people, and people who were very different from me,” he says. “And it was a little different then to how it is now: back then, there were very few people under the age

of 18. I think there were only two or three of us. It was much more weighted to the older generation, and a lot of them were already college students. So at that time in my life, hanging out with people who were well into their 20s led to me developing very quickly.”

Currie stayed with NYOS for four years, later moving into the senior role of principal timpanist. “And I went on from there to get a scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Music,” he continues, “and later to join the European Union Youth Orchestra also as principal timpanist. And then in 1992 I won the Shell/LSO Competition. I think my NYOS experience was crucial in all those things.”

Though immersed in the orchestral world, Currie soon took the bold step of embarking on the life of a percussion soloist. And it's through his solo work – as well as that of the Colin Currie Group, which he established in 2006 – that he's achieved international success. In 2015, however, he returned to NYOS as patron of the organisation's Senior Orchestra, for young players aged 13 and over. And he gave a return

performance in 2017 as soloist in Switch, the playful percussion concerto by US composer Andrew Norman, a work that Currie himself had premiered. How did he find rekindling his relationship? “It was superb!” he exclaims. “It was a dream to bring back to NYOS a piece that I'd premiered, then play it with the orchestra with which I'd first helped to bring a new piece to life. It really suited everyone, and there was a lot of enthusiasm. I now see

NYOS as an artistic partner.”

What kind of contact does he maintain with NYOS now? “Well, I'm obviously a spokesperson for the orchestra, and they're always in my thoughts – we're already planning more projects for the future.” And having played in more than one youth orchestra himself, Currie is clear about their crucial importance to young players. “First of all, you won't meet an orchestral player in this country or many others who hasn't played in a youth orchestra. It's the feeder system for the professional orchestras. But then of course these kind of studies are enriching and energising on all kinds of levels – it's about helping youngsters develop more broadly, and be creative.”

## DAVID KETTLE

● The National Youth Orchestras of Scotland are celebrating their 40th anniversary with a series of concerts all around the country. The next performance, the NYOS Junior Orchestra Summer Concert, is at Perth Concert Hall on 7 July. For a full programme – and to watch a video interview with Colin Currie – see [www.nyos.co.uk](http://www.nyos.co.uk)

