

# Confidence and growing ambition mark the RSNO's first tour to the US in 35 years



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When we were planning things, nobody could have predicted that the US would feature quite so prominently in the news as it does now." Chief executive Krishna Thiagarajan is talking about the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's imminent American tour, organised well before the current, turbulent episode in the country's history.

When the RSNO and music director Peter Oundjian, joined by violinist Nicola Benedetti, jet off today for an eight-concert tour of Florida, it will be the orchestra's first trip across the pond in more than 30 years. "For reasons I can't really explain – in fact I was only a teenager at the time – we stopped touring to the US in the mid-1980s," continues Thiagarajan, "and that seemed to me a missed opportunity." And if anyone should know the US scene, it's Thiagarajan. He joined the RSNO in 2015 following positions with several US ensembles, most recently New York's Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. And he sees a natural connection between the Orchestra and his former home. "We're being played on US public classical radio as often as any US orchestra," he says. "Every week, I have a colleague based in Seattle or New York or Los Angeles say to me: 'Wow, we just heard the RSNO on the radio.'"

Not only will the tour strengthen the orchestra's international identity, Thiagarajan hopes, but also feed into performances back home. "We're cultural ambassadors for Scotland, and it's an important part of our mission to go abroad and share what we know to be extraordinary. And by the same token, we take those influences and bring them back into Scotland – in today's environment, that idea of cultural exchange has never been more important."

There's a strong US flavour, too, in the orchestra's 2017-18 season, revealed earlier this week. Music by Adams, Barber, Gershwin and more infiltrates the orchestra's more traditional offerings, and there's even a brand new Tuba Concerto from US composer Jennifer Higdon, written



Peter Oundjian will lead the RSNO on its eight-concert US tour

for RSNO principal John Whitener. One of the strand's undoubted highlights will be the Scottish premiere of Leonard Bernstein's crazy, joyfully all-encompassing MASS, an unclassifiable mix of sacred music, rock opera and experimental theatre that will mark the culmination of a Glasgow-wide celebration of Bernstein's centenary in 2018. Thiagarajan is perhaps understandably reluctant to describe the sprawling piece. "I think everyone should have their own experience of Bernstein's MASS,

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but we're also celebrating 175 years of the RSNO Chorus this season, and with MASS we have a work that's really challenging for them, for the orchestra – and, in a good way, for the audience. It's important in these times to challenge yourself intellectually, because I feel strongly that we've entered a time when the intellectual pursuit doesn't seem as valued as it should be."

There's a gratifying focus, too, on female composers and conductors among the RSNO's coming season – three out of its four "Symphony, Soup and a Sandwich" lunchtime concerts are conducted by women,

Thiagarajan is keen to point out. And German cellist Jan Vogler takes up a special residency with the orchestra, performing two evening concerts (one featuring a new Double Concerto from major German composer Wolfgang Rihm) as well as joining RSNO string principals for a chamber recital. "We'd like to do more of this in the future – identifying both a composer and an artist in residence, and really showcasing them," explains Thiagarajan. "It brings a chance for someone to immerse themselves in the orchestra's culture, so that the orchestra and soloist both benefit from this closer collaboration."

Thiagarajan's touring ambitions continue, too, with dates in Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Italy under discussion for 2018. "We're aiming to return to the high end of the festival scene in continental Europe," he explains. "If you're on the same bill as names like the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, for instance, it focuses the orchestra's mind, sharpens the sound, and you sit at the edge of your seat because you give your best."

There's still a strong focus on the RSNO's more familiar mainstream activities, naturally. But we're seeing a new outwardness in the orchestra's thinking, an ambition to look far afield and to bring the benefits back to Scotland – an openness that's increasingly crucial in our uncertain times. ■