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Runnicles conducts in the Philharmonie

-Klaus Geitel

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Naturally Berlioz could be proud of his "Grande Messe des Morts," this (until then) truly outrageous work whose instrumental and vocal extravagance still today exceeds any notion. The mere sight of the enormous row of timpani on the podium of the Philharmonie, the four offstage bands – literally stacked around the sky – meant to make one speechless. From high above all this, the robust, melodious sound of the solo tenor fell down like dew. The Canadian Joseph Kaiser lent his generous, penetrating voice. Under the (incidentally, left,) hand of Donald Runnicles an ensemble of eventful character was united with the Philharmonic.

The top seats onstage were taken by the visiting Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, led by Norman Mackenzie: a group of joyous and powerful amateur singers who need not hide behind any professional choir. From two hundred well trained throats Berlioz's "Requiem" arose shining.

At times the piece sounds like a reading of an award-winning menu of unexpected sound-possibilities. Berlioz possibly may have worn five chef-hats when composing, judging by the strong flavor of this Requiem with its fresh ingredients of a completely new interaction. In the "Hostias" he mercilessly pits three flutes against eight trombones. It is however no massacre, but at his request exactly heard, and the sound tastes delicious. All instrumental extravagance is highly and carefully controlled. Berlioz's visions tend rather towards high-carat mildness as to continuous thunder-screams. Even in the prophecy of the "Dies irae," the Day of Wrath – otherwise gladly itching for a battle of instruments in the hall – Berlioz does not lose his elegant diction.

With his Death-Mass he never digs a mass grave. He holds steadfastly true to the primacy of the music. It traverses the graves with fervor, devotion and the finest heartfelt longing. It gives them a serious luxury. It is based on musical haute couture - and nothing short of a Christian Dior on the podium. Donald Runnicles, Music Director designate of the Deutsche Oper, proved to be far more than a formidable replacement there.