

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/:art772.2532520>

Piano from 200 throats

Donald Runnicles, future chief conductor of the Deutsche Oper, the Berlin Philharmonic

-Sybill Mahlke
May 17, 2008

Hector Berlioz, the bold Frenchman, is the May-program presented by the Berlin Philharmonic. Highly sought, Claudio Abbado comes back to his orchestra to conduct the "Te Deum." He follows Simon Rattle with "La Mort de Cléopâtre" and the "Symphonie fantastique" in a [3-week] nine-evening Berlioz festival.

It is opened by Donald Runnicles, the British conductor, who since 2003 has been associated with the Philharmonic. Now he returns again as Music Director designate of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Much hope is on him, because the bright lights on Bismarckstraße have threatened to go out, arising once from the orchestra pit. Illustrious names like Fricsay, Maazel, Sinopoli, Thielemann arouse great memories. Runnicles, whom not only the orchestra learned to appreciate for his guest performance of Wagner, is expected to pull back the grey veil of lost years of music, where lately a leader without luck acted.

Runnicles, born in 1954 in Edinburgh, has much theater experience in many places and since 1992 has been musical director of the San Francisco Opera. -And in addition, together with many other things, Principal Guest Conductor in Atlanta. There this fabled choir of some 200 singers exists who, with the Maestro, already once before astonished [audiences] with the Berlin Philharmonic. The choir is a miracle, because from its 200 throats it conjures a pianissimo and almost whispers the sound or tone it sings – an amateur choir! The "Grande Messe des Morts," premiered in Paris' Les Invalides chapel, filled the Philharmonie with sound.

Four remote offstage bands, among them trumpets, trombones and tubas, a long row of timpani behind the main orchestra, all call for the Last Judgement. Runnicles is in command of the legions of singing and playing musicians, a certain unruffledness to do this. -But even more so, a feeling for the awesome style of this Mass for the Dead, for its authenticity and vibration in the "Tuba mirum." It is the trumpets of the apocalyptic horsemen that seize us with terror in the concert hall. And when the movement quietly recedes with the "Quid sum miser" and its plaintive English horn solo, it gains special intimacy. What makes this Requiem incomparable are the contrasts between the descent into hell and the prayer of a lonely soul as if in a cloister cell. Joseph Kaiser sings the "Sanctus" like a Lohengrin from heaven. Runnicles brings across unanimity as means of expression; he carries the noble sound of the low strings in his hands and maintains the concentration between rests. He emphasizes that there is no more interesting instrumentation than that of Berlioz.