

# Donald Runnicles

## Press Release

**Medium** Opera News  
**Date** March 2018  
**Author** A. J. Goldmann  
**Link** [https://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2018/3/Features/Berlin\\_Undivided.html](https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2018/3/Features/Berlin_Undivided.html)

## BERLIN UNDIVIDED

*The capital of Germany boasts unparalleled musical riches—including three opera companies.*

ON OCTOBER 3, BERLIN'S HISTORIC STAATSOPER UNTER DEN LINDEN RE OPEN ED with Daniel Barenboim conducting Robert Schumann's Szenen aus Goethes Faust. It was the house's first performance after being shuttered for renovations for seven years. In any other city on earth, this would have been the event of the year, if not the decade.

In music-saturated Berlin, a city with three full-time opera companies and seven full-time orchestras, it seemed like just one highlight among many. When all is said and done, this season Berlin will see hundreds of performances of more than seventy-five different full productions, including twenty new stagings of works ranging from Monteverdi to world premieres.

Four miles west of the Staatsoper is Deutsche Oper Berlin, a 105-year-old company known for big voices and grand operas, which fielded starry casts during the years when the city was divided. Founded in 1912, in what was then the independent township of Charlottenburg, it was designed as a „Winter Bayreuth“ to show Wagner's modern music dramas to best possible advantage. The city's third opera house, Komische Oper-located, like the Staatsoper.

The Staatsoper had already cleared out of Unter den Linden before Kosky's first season, which means that Barenboim's company returns to an altered operatic landscape. For the first time, it may face direct competition from the reinvigorated Komische, a mere ten-minute walk away. Barenboim, who was appointed general music director of the Staatsoper unter den Linden and its nearly 450-year-old orchestra. Staatskapelle, in 1991, has brought that company, founded by Frederick the Great in 1743, into the twenty-first century with singular vision and determination. Barenboim's impressions of Berlin were not all positive when he made his first trip to Germany, as a twenty-year-old pianist in 1963. „Munich was already a thriving city, and elegant, and Berlin was kind of, how shall I say, an impertinent, agitated, not very beautiful city,“ the seventy-five-year-old maestro recalled in a recent conversation in the offices of the Staatsoper unter den Linden.

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„But through the years I learned—and I don't mean to be impolite towards Munich, because it really is a wonderful city, but Munich always gave me the feeling that you're supposed to come and say, ‚Oh what a wonderful place it is, they have nice gardens, and the opera is wonderful.‘ Berlin demanded that you do something. Berlin was a demanding city, and it still is. It still is, in every way. I was very much attracted to—that.

With so much music on tap, it seems almost miraculous that there's sufficient audience interest in a city with fewer than four million inhabitants. Among the many offerings at Berlin's Musikfest this year was a celebration of Claudia Monteverdi's 450th birthday. John Eliot Gardiner led his acclaimed concert cycle of Orfeo, U/isse and Poppea, and the RIAS Chamber Choir and its new leader, Justin Doyle, explored the composer's sacred music in a powerful pair of concerts that contrasted Vespro del/a Beata Vergine and Missa in /1/o Tempore, published together in 1610, in two extremely different venues—Frank Gehry's brand new Pierre Boulez Saal and the nearby St. Hedwig's Cathedral, the city's main Catholic church. Virtually all of the above-mentioned concerts were sold out, many well in advance.

In Berlin, the glut of offerings can force difficult choices. For example, at the exact same time as the Staatsoper reopening, Berlin music-lovers wended their way down from Unter den Linden to the Boulez Saal for a much-anticipated collaboration between theater director Robert Wilson and the Berlin Radio Choir. Wilson is a celebrity here, where his sensational Dreigroschenoper at the Berliner Ensemble is considered a classic. LUTHER dancing with the gods, his first outing with the esteemed choir, interspersed dramatic scenes with Bach motets, Knut Nystedt's „Immortal Bach“ and Steve Reich's „Clapping Music.“

Berliners who opted for LUTHER over the Staatsoper's Faust that evening chose well. An awkward mixture of music and drama directed by the company's staging of Schumann's grandest oratorio smacked of compromise, since the long-delayed renovation, four years behind schedule, was still not finished.

„I was not willing to accept another postponement,“ Barenboim insisted, adding that the relatively uncomplicated staging came with a built-in safety net: if the stagecraft had malfunctioned, the company could have just done a concert performance.

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After two performances of the Schumann Faust and concerts by the Staatskapelle and the Wiener Philharmoniker, the house was shuttered for another two months while technicians mastered the computerized stage mechanisms. In early December, it reopened for good with back-to-back premieres of Hänsel und Grete/ and L'Incoronazione di Poppea, two vastly different works that seemed calculated to show off the possibilities of an old-new house whose acoustics have undergone a massive improvement. (The ceiling was raised by roughly sixteen feet to insert a ceramic net that helps distribute sound.)

During renovations, the Staatsoper had relocated to the Schiller Theater, a previously disused stage in the western part of the city. For seven seasons in exile, the Staatsoper maintained an impressive program of well-cast premieres and even a Ring cycle. Some of the company's best Schiller-era stagings will return in the coming months, including Claus Guth's gothic production of The Turn of the Screw and Dmitri Tcherniakov's Dostoyevskian take on Parsifal. In February, the Russian director also gave the Staatsoper a new Tristan. A new Macbeth with Anna Netrebko and Placido Domingo arrives in June.

THE ORIGINAL 1912 DEUTSCHE OPER HOUSE eschewed ornament and was renowned for its excellent sightlines and acoustics. These qualities were preserved in the house's 1961 reconstruction, the beginning of the postwar flourishing: as the only opera house in West Berlin—and the secondlargest by size in Germany, with almost 2,000 seats—it was able to attract the best international singers, conductors and directors. Götz Friedrich was the house's legendary intendant from 1981 until 2000, and his immensely popular Ring cycle played its final performances last season. (The Norwegian director Stefan Herheim will direct the company's new Ring, starting in 2020.)

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Deutsche Oper has one of the largest active repertoires of any house on earth. This season, the company will present twenty-eight revivals—more than the output of Berlin’s other two houses combined—and six premieres. The world premiere of Aribert Reimann’s *Invisible* kicked off Deutsche Oper’s 2017–18 season and was a rousing success. Donald Runnicles, Deutsche Oper’s general music director since 2009, led the excellent house orchestra and a cast drawn largely from the company’s ensemble in a gripping, enigmatic and deeply unsettling performance of this sinister new score. Deutsche Oper champions both new and neglected works, from Helmut Lachenmann to Giacomo Meyerbeer, alongside the core repertoire that is the house’s bread and butter. The Scottish maestro’s highlights for the rest of the season include revivals of *Don Carlo*, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, as well as a new production of *Die Fledermaus*, directed by Rolando Villazon.

AFTER GERMANY—AND BERLIN—REUNITED in 1990, the curtain rose on a round of opera wars. Maintaining three full-time opera houses seemed impractical for a cash-strapped city. For a long time, Komische Oper found itself the odd man out in a city with two world-class opera companies. In the early 2000s, there were serious political discussions about shuttering the Komische, founded in 1947 by the Austrian director Walter Felsenstein in what was soon to become East Germany. Andreas Homoki, the company’s intendant between 2002 and 2012, averted that danger, making the company relevant for the newly minted capital by enlarging the repertoire and bringing new theatrical practices to the house. Kosky has taken such innovations to a whole new level with his dynamic leadership. The Komische’s neo-Baroque auditorium, rebuilt by the East German government in 1966, used to be Berlin’s storied Metropol-Theater, an operetta and revue stage. Harking back to that prewar company, Kosky has made a mission of reviving Weimar-era operettas by forgotten Jewish composers. Before Kosky took the reins, attendance was hovering around 66 percent. Five and a half seasons later, that figure has shot up to 85.3.

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In addition to riotous Weimar operettas, Kosky has worked his magic on Monteverdi, Schoenberg, Debussy and Ligeti. This winter, he scored another triumph with a deeply moving *Fiddler on the Roof*. The season's hottest tickets also include the Berlin premiere of Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*. Kosky's eighth and final production this year will be the June premiere of Shostakovich's *Nase*. More than either of the city's other two houses, the Komische now has a unique and instantly recognizable profile. When I interviewed Kosky for a *Wall Street Journal* profile shortly before his tenure began, he put it bluntly: „If you're going to have a city of 3.5 million people that has three major international opera houses, you better be sure those three houses have very particular identities and repertoire.“ Barenboim feels no qualms about sharing the neighborhood with Kosky's troupe. „The identities of Berlin's opera houses that in the past were so different are impossible to recreate,“ he says. „All the houses had a built-in system of characterization. The Staatsoper represented tradition. The Deutsche Oper represented the freedom. All this is gone now. A new system has to be found. And this speaks not only for the three operas, but for the whole of Berlin.“

Barenboim points to Berlin's turbulent history as an argument for not resting on past laurels. „The past is not gone in Paris, in London or in Rome. But here it is gone. (The city) was divided, and now it is not. Therefore you cannot rely on the past. You have to create something, a new identity,“ he says. „And that's very interesting. I feel that daily.“

A. J. Goldmann writes about arts and culture for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Forward*.