

**80th Birthday
Season 2025/26**

**Runnicles conducts
Bruckner 8**

**Thursday 19 February 2026
Royal Festival Hall**

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Welcome to this evening's concert

Philharmonia 80

Runnicles conducts Bruckner 8

Thursday 19 February 2026, 7.30pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Donald Runnicles – conductor

BRUCKNER Symphony No. 8
(74 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 8.50pm

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In a nutshell...

Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 is an 80-minute 'cathedral in sound' – vast, intense and deeply spiritual, and one of the most ambitious works he ever completed. Tonight conducted by Donald Runnicles, the work is scored for a massive orchestra including triple woodwinds, 8 horns, and harps. It is characterized by intense, Wagnerian brass chorales, profound spiritual depth, and an apocalyptic, emotionally charged, and highly contrapuntal structure.

It opens in an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty, with a dark theme in the low strings that keeps returning in different guises.

The energetic Scherzo drives relentlessly forward, before the expansive Adagio brings music of glowing warmth, solemn beauty and quiet awe.

The Finale draws the whole symphony together, recalling earlier ideas and transforming them in a dramatic struggle that finally resolves in a triumphant contrapuntal blaze of sound. Listen for the way themes reappear and grow across the piece, and for the powerful sense of journey, from doubt and darkness to overwhelming affirmation at the end.



Philharmonia Social

Philharmonia Social is our new initiative to help everyone feel welcome at our concerts.

Our staff, players and volunteers will be at the Level 4 bar Blue Side, before the concert.

6.30pm: a short introduction to the orchestra and this evening's performance

6.45pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members



Anton Bruckner © Public Domain

Anton Bruckner (1824 – 1896)

Symphony No. 8 in C minor
(1887, rev.1890) (74 mins)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo. Allegro moderato – Trio.
Langsam

Adagio. Feierlich langsam, doch nicht
schleppend
Finale. Feierlich, nicht schnell

In 1885, the year of Bruckner's 61st birthday, the composer finally got his big break. His Seventh Symphony had been premiered in December 1884 to relatively warm reviews; but when it was given in Munich in March 1885 under the baton of the famous Wagner conductor Hermann Levi, the piece caused a sensation. Further performances were quickly given in Cologne, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Graz, Berlin, London, Dresden, and Budapest. In July 1886, it was also heard in Chicago, Boston and New York.

After decades of wrestling with poor reviews and baffled audiences, Bruckner's star was finally in the ascendant. In the meantime, he'd been working hard on other pieces. The first drafts of his Eighth Symphony date from the summer of 1884 (It took him a full year to get the Seventh premiered after finishing it, but Bruckner was enough of a workaholic to have powered straight on with other projects almost as soon as he'd finished it).

Since he was a professor at the Vienna Conservatoire and an organist at the Court Chapel, Bruckner did most of his composing over the quieter summer months. Half of the Symphony was drafted in 1884, the other half in the summer of 1885. The orchestration was slower, but he finally declared it complete in August 1887.

Not surprisingly, Bruckner was keen that Hermann Levi, the man who had conducted the Seventh to such acclaim, should take on the job of premiering the Eighth. He quickly dispatched a score to Levi, writing "Hallelujah! At long last the Eighth is finished... I would like to ask you please to give the first performance.

And then things began to unravel. Despite his enthusiasm, Levi found that Bruckner's new score was utterly baffling to him. He eventually confessed to the composer, with as much care as he could, that:

"It has never been so difficult for me to find the right words for what I have to say! But now I must say it... it is impossible

for me to perform the Eighth in its current shape. I can't get used to it! No matter how wonderful and grandiose the themes are, I consider their execution as difficult, and the orchestration is nigh impossible. Far be it for me to pass judgement: I can only offer you my impression and my opinion on how it would be received by my audience; and I have to be honest with you and tell you that I consider a performance of the 8th as part of my concert season is a risk that I must not take, for your own sake... Please release me from my promise to perform this piece, as I would only conduct it badly."

This was a blow to Bruckner – but he rallied, thanked Levi for his honesty, and by 1888 had started work on the revisions that the conductor had suggested might make the piece more palatable for contemporary audiences and performers. By the spring of 1890, the work was finished and the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I accepted the dedication of Bruckner's newly-revised Eighth. All that remained was to organise a first performance.

Yet again, Bruckner hit a brick wall. Levi declared himself unable to take on the job and recommended the brilliant young Felix Weingartner instead. Weingartner initially agreed but postponed and then dropped the premiere on the grounds of time pressure, confiding in friends that Bruckner's Symphony was simply too long and too difficult. A London performance was mooted and then vanished.

Bruckner did finally persuade Levi to conduct it after all... but that concert was cancelled due to a cholera outbreak.

So it was only in December 1892, eight years after he'd first begun sketching the piece, that Bruckner finally heard his Eighth Symphony – his last completed symphonic work – performed by the Vienna Philharmonic under the baton of Hans Richter. The hall was filled with both young Bruckner enthusiasts and many of the musical stars of the day: Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf, Johann Strauss II, and Richard Wagner's son Siegfried. All sat in anticipation of hearing this new piece for the first time.

The Eighth is an epic work on the grandest of scales. The opening theme, heard in the low strings, is brooding and uncertain: it pushes upwards in anticipation only to sink back downwards in disappointment. When the full orchestra restates the same idea, the theme's falling away is gentled and then reversed, leading to a warm rising melody in the violins. From these initial gestures, Bruckner grows a mighty Allegro – sometimes harsh and angular, at other moments rich and tender. Much later, the driving rhythm of that opening theme is given to trumpets and horns on a single note, loud and insistent. Bruckner described this as the *Todesverkündigung* – the 'annunciation of death', before 'surrender' in the movement's hushed close.

The Scherzo circles so obsessively around an energetic cascade of falling notes that it almost seems to pre-empt 1980s minimalism. Bruckner described the main theme as representing Deutscher Michel, a popular stereotype of a naïve and easy-going German, who “wants to sleep” in the central section but “cannot find his beloved” – so he goes back to his opening theme again.

The slow movement is marked ‘Feierlich langsam’. We can translate ‘feierlich’ as ‘solemn’, but it also implies something ceremonial. As a musician who had spent the first half of his career working as an organist and composer in Linz Cathedral (not to mention his own devout Catholicism), Bruckner was a man deeply familiar with – and arguably wedded to – a sense of the ceremonial. There is both grandeur and gentleness here – as well as references to two of Wagner’s operas, *Siegfried* and *Tristan und Isolde*, in deference to one of Bruckner’s most important musical gods.

The composer described the finale as recalling a historic meeting of emperors: the German Kaiser Wilhelm I, Austrian Emperor Franz Josef I, and Tsar Alexander III in 1884. This is all grand fanfares and galloping horses to begin with, but it softens into noble exchanges that recall the slow movement – and Deutscher Michel is also brought into the scene, summoned again after his turn in the Scherzo. Finally we return to the ‘annunciation of death’ theme of the opening Allegro; but this time we also hear the funeral that follows it. And yet that’s not the end. Slowly but inexorably death itself is overcome, and the symphony ends in a blaze of transfigured glory.

People hurried from the auditorium at the end of every movement of that premiere in December 1892. The famous Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick left just before the finale to sarcastic applause from Bruckner’s admirers. And yet even Hanslick could not bring himself to be entirely negative. “In each of the four movements,” he wrote, ‘especially the first and third, some interesting passages, flashes of genius, shine through – if only the rest of it was not there!’. There’s an element of fiction here, of course, since Hanslick never heard the last movement. But as Bruckner himself wryly observed afterwards, if he had remained, he would have been ‘even angrier by the end.’

Programme notes © Katy Hamilton

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Donald Runnicles – conductor

Philharmonia 80



Sir Donald Runnicles © Simon Paul

Over a career spanning 45 years, Sir Donald Runnicles has built his reputation on enduring relationships with several of the world's most significant opera companies and orchestras. He is especially celebrated for his interpretations of the Romantic and post-Romantic repertoire which are core to his musical identity.

The 2025-2026 season is one of transition: it marks both his final season as Music Director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin as well as his first season as Chief Conductor of the Dresden Philharmonic. He also continues to serve as Music Director of the Grand Teton Music Festival and as the first-ever Principal Guest Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Sir Donald concludes his tenure with the Deutsche Oper Berlin with Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, new productions of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* by Michael Thalheimer and Korngold's *Violanta* by David Hermann, all culminating in two cycles of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

in a Stefan Herheim production that he premiered with the company. Over the course of his sixteen-year tenure, Sir Donald cemented himself as one of the central figures in the German cultural scene. Significant artistic achievements with the company include the completion of a Strauss cycle including *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Arabella*, and *Intermezzo* in collaboration with director Tobias Kratzer; a survey of Janáček's operas including *Jenůfa*, *Káťa Kabanová*, *Die Sache Makropulos*, and *Das schlaue Füchslein*; world premieres of Detlev Glanert's *Oceane* and Aribert Reimann's *L'Invisible*, as well as introducing the music of Benjamin Britten to the company with performances of *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Death in Venice*, and *The Rape of Lucretia*.

In Sir Donald's inaugural season as Chief Conductor with the Dresden Philharmonic in 25/26, he leads ten weeks of programs including a concertante version of Strauss' *Elektra*, highlights his British heritage with performances of William Walton's Viola Concerto with British violist Timothy Ridout, and Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan's Symphony No. 4 (which was originally composed to celebrate Sir Donald's 60th birthday), and concludes the season with a ten-city Asia tour of Japan and Korea.

He returns to conduct four weeks as Principal Guest Conductor of the Sydney Symphony with performances of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and Violin Concerto No. 1 with violinist Leonidas Kavakos, as well as Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5. Guest engagements for the 25/26 season include performances of Mahler's Symphony No. 1 with the San Francisco Symphony, Mahler's Symphony No. 2 "Resurrection" with the BBC Scottish Symphony, and Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 in his debut with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London.

Sir Donald spends his summers as Music Director of the Grand Teton Music Festival. This eight-week festival of symphonic and chamber music, five of which are conducted by Runnicles, takes place amid the breathtaking beauty of Grand Teton National Park.

Past chief artistic leadership roles include the San Francisco Opera (1992-2008), BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (2009-2016), and the Orchestra of St. Luke's (2001-2007). Sir Donald was also Principal Guest Conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for more than two decades (2001-2023).

Sir Donald has toured widely with the DOB to destinations such as the Edinburgh International Festival, London Proms, and Royal Opera House Muscat in Oman. He joined the Philadelphia Orchestra on a tour to China and a

summer residency at Bravo! Vail Music Festival. A regular guest conductor with the Chicago Symphony, Runnicles' performance history with the orchestra dates back to 1997. Over a decade-long relationship with the Vienna State Opera, he led new productions of *Parsifal*, Britten's *Billy Budd* and *Peter Grimes*, as well as pieces from the core repertoire. He's conducted the Berlin Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the Orchestre de Paris, among many of the world's leading orchestras.

His extensive discography includes recordings of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Britten's *Billy Budd*, Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, and Aribert Reimann's *L'Invisible*. His recording of Wagner arias with Jonas Kaufmann and the Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin won the 2013 Gramophone prize for Best Vocal Recording, and his recording of Janáček's *Jenůfa* with the Orchestra and Chorus of the Deutsche Oper Berlin was nominated for a 2016 GRAMMY award for Best Opera Recording.

Donald Runnicles was born and raised in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was appointed OBE in 2004, and was made a Knight Bachelor in 2020. He holds honorary degrees from the University of Edinburgh, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Principal Viola Scott Dickinson discusses Bruckner



Scott Dickinson © Marina Vidor

For anyone listening to Bruckner for the very first time, how would you describe his music?

Radiant, heavenly, multi-dimensional. I suggest clearing your mind and allowing Bruckner's warmth to envelope you! Like an expertly paced slow burn movie, he can make you feel as though time is unfolding both slowly and fast. Whether he is depicting the delicate flowers, burbling streams and epic mountain vistas of his beloved Alpine pastures or his deep spiritual musings, let yourself be transported. Listen for the thrill of dazzling brass fanfares, the rich and shiny Wagner tubas right at the back of the orchestra, the thundering timpani drums, the intimate hymns in the woodwind, the glorious harps and the huge glow in the strings.

The idea of the 'annunciation of death' recurs across the symphony. How does that concept come across from within the orchestra?

Bruckner's unique sense of expectation, tension and release mean that there are plenty of ominous moments, but my

personal feeling is that the music guides us upwards to acceptance, perspective and serenity.

What's it like working with Donald Runnicles?

In our challenging yet ever wonderful profession, nothing is ever routine, especially fascinating indefinability of what makes the relationship between conductor and players flourish.

Sir Donald fills the room with his graceful, enabling presence and extraordinary combination of knowledge, intuition and verbal and physical eloquence. Often, the sound from the players mysteriously becomes richer, lithe, alive.

Do you have a favourite movement in the symphony?

Now there's an impossible question! The outer two smoulder and erupt with volcanic intensity, and the Scherzo has boisterous interplay of instruments, but the core of the symphony is the sombre, deeply sonorous Adagio, which is for me one of the great statements of and about humanity. Its beauty is breathtaking and beyond words.

What do you hope audiences take away from this performance of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony?

Hope, solace, joy, perspective and much more. Live music is always about shared experience, and we really hope that Bruckner will stir your soul in the way he does ours on stage.

About the Philharmonia

Philharmonia 80

Resident at the Southbank Centre since 1995, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, and tours extensively worldwide. A major US tour in October culminated in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LP's and more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks. The Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Symphony No.5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and immersive installations and virtual reality experiences introduce orchestral music to new audiences.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.



Santtu-Matias Rouvali and the Philharmonia Orchestra

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