18 September 2025

DONALD RUNNICLES CONDUCTS

SIBELIUS & WAGNER



#SYDNEY"
#SYMPHONY"
#ORCHESTRA



SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PATRON Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdenêk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

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Harry Bennetts

Associate Concertmaster

Fiona Ziealer

Assistant Concertmaster

Emily Long

Acting Assistant Concertmaster

Jennifer Booth

Sophie Cole Sercan Danis

Claire Herrick

Georges Lentz

Alex Mitchell

Leone Ziegler

Marcus Michelsenº

Brian Hong^o

Ben Tjoa^o

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Kirsty Hilton

Principal

Marina Marsden

Principal Emeritus

Emma Jezek

Assistant Principal Alice Bartsch

Rebecca Gill

Emma Haves Shuti Huang

Wendy Kong

Benjamin Li Nicole Masters

Maja Verunica

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Sandro Costantino

Rosemary Curtin

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Mark Robinson Acting Principal

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Principal

Joshua Hill^o

Acting Associate Principal / Section Percussion

Louisic Dulbecco

Principal

ORGAN

David Drury* Guest Principal

Bold Principal

* Guest Musician

Oontract Musician

[†] Sydney Symphony Fellow

2025 CONCERT SEASON

SYMPHONY HOUR

Thursday 18 September, 7pm

Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House

DONALD RUNNICLES CONDUCTS SIBELIUS AND WAGNER

STRIKING AND SWEEPING

DONALD RUNNICLES conductor

RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883) The Flying Dutchman (1841) Overture

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865–1957) **Symphony No.2, Op.43** (1901–02)

i. Allegretto

ii. Tempo andante

iii. Vivacissimo -

iv. Allegro moderato

Estimated durations

Wagner – 12 minutes Sibelius – 47 minutes The concert will run for approximately 1 hour

Cover image

By Rebecca Shaw

Principal Partner





YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883) The Flying Dutchman (1841)

Overture

In this relatively early work Wagner does what composers had always done and cobbled together the best tunes from the completed opera about a damned soul condemned to roam the northern seas in a ghost-ship until released by the self-sacrificing love of a woman. But being Wagner, what he comes up with is an eleven-minute symphonic poem which evokes the stormy sea, the ballad in which Senta, the heroine, tells the legend, and the bluff humour of the sailors' chorus.

It was composed in 1841, the year that saw the multilateral Treaty for the Suppression of the African Slave Trade, the British occupation of Hong Kong and the official separation for New Zealand from New South Wales.

Contemporary music included Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*, Clara Schumann's Lieder, Op.12 and Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*.



Portrait sketch of Richard Wagner by Ernst Benedikt Kietz, c.1840.

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865–1957) **Symphony No.2, Op.43** (1901–02)

Having established his orchestral skill in a series of 'Finnish' tone-poems, Sibelius began composing symphonies. The second appeared after (and possibly reflects) a trip to Italy, as well as material that was destined for a tone-poem on Don Juan. But the big tune that dominates the last of the four movements has been seen as embodying Finnish nationalism. It appeared in 1902, the year that saw the coronation of Edward VII at Westminster Abbey, the completion of the first Aswan Dam on the Nile and the Commonwealth Franchise Act enable (most) Australian women to vote.

Contemporary music included Bartók's *Scherzo burlesque* for piano and orchestra, Saint-Saëns' Cello Concerto No.2 and Ethel Smyth's *Der Wald*.



Sibelius c.1900. Source: Finnish Heritage Agency/Wikimedia

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

DONALD RUNNICLES conductor

Over the course of a career spanning 45 years. Sir Donald Runnicles has built his reputation on enduring relationships with several of the most significant opera companies and orchestras, and is especially celebrated for his interpretations of Romantic and post-Romanic symphonic and opera repertoire which are core to his musical identity. He is the music director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin (since 2009) and the Grand Teton Music Festival (since 2005) and has held chief artistic leadership. roles at 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), and he is the Principal Guest Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (since 2019). In February 2024, Runnicles was appointed as Chief Conductor of the Dresden Philharmonic, beginning in the 25/26 season.

Maestro Runnicles kicks off his 24/25 season with a 70th birthday celebration concert at the Edinburah International Festival conducting the BBC Scottish Symphony in a program of Mahler and Bruckner, after which he opens the Dresden Philharmonic's season in his first concerts as Chief Conductor Designate, returning two more times over the course of the season. At the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Runnicles concludes his Strauss cycle in collaboration with director Tobias Kratzer with a new production of Die Frau ohne Schatten. alongside Arabella and Intermezzo, as well as revival performances of Zemlinsky's Der Zwerg, Puccini's La bohème, Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, Verdi's Don Carlo, and a symphony concert with the DOB as part of Musikfest Berlin. In North America. he makes guest appearances with the Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, Houston and Pittsburgh symphony orchestras. He also returns twice to the Sydney Symphony.

Runnicles spends his summers at the Grand Teton Music Festival in Jackson, Wyoming. This eight-week festival of symphonic and chamber music, five of which are conducted by Runnicles as music director, takes place amid the breathtaking beauty of Grand Teton National Park. Summer 2024 GTMF highlights included a semi-staged *The Magic Flute*, concerts with Augustin Hadelich and Yo-Yo Ma, and fifth symphonies by Mahler and Vaughan Williams.

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.

Sir 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.

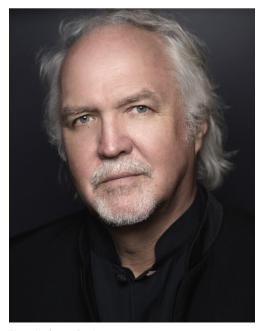


Photo by Simon Pauly

ABOUT RICHARD WAGNER

In 1842 Wagner saw the Rhine for the first time and, 'with tears in my eyes I, a poor artist, swore eternal faith to my German fatherland'. The Rhine would soon embody 'the world's beginning and its end' in Wagner's great cycle of operas, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; but now, it symbolized the end of several precarious and impecunious years.

After his father's death, when Richard was six months old, the family moved with his new stepfather Ludwig Geyer, an actor and playwright, from Leipzig to Dresden. The young Wagner wrote a tragedy 'like Hamlet and King Lear rolled into one', with 47 deaths on stage before interval. Only when he heard Beethoven's music for Goethe's Egmont did Wagner understand that his vision could only be realised in music as powerful as Beethoven's – and that only he could compose it.

In 1837 Wagner accepted a musicdirectorship in Riga. Hopelessly in debt he and his wife fled to London. From London they travelled to Boulogne where the popular German-Jewish composer Giacomo Meyerbeer provided Wagner with letters of introduction to influential Parisians. In 1842 he returned to Germany and saw the Rhine.

Wagner lived in Dresden until early 1849, but his support of the republican cause in the 1848 revolution meant that he and Minna had to flee the country. Binary themes of sacred and erotic, power and renunciation, tradition and innovation emerge in the works of the 1840s works and remain crucial to Wagner's output in librettos and treatises. The philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer led Wagner to approve Buddhism's teaching about the ultimately illusory nature of reality and Christianity's teaching on renunciation.

In 1864, 18-year old Ludwig became King of Bavaria, paid Wagner's debts and gave him a ministerial salary. The king's generosity and Wagner's cohabitation with Liszt's married daughter, Cosima, caused scandal, so they withdrew to the luxury of the villa 'Triebchen' on Lake Lucerne.



Portrait sketch of Richard Wagner by Ernst Benedikt Kietz. c.1840.

Wagner chose the Franconian town of Bayreuth for his dreamed-of festival, presenting the first full *Ring* in 1876. *Parsifal*, in which Wagner revisits the Arthurian world of *Lohengrin* and *Tristan* as a vehicle for his own take on Schopenhauer and the Christian notion of grace appeared in 1882. His health was failing, and having settled for a time in Venice, he died there in 1883.

Wagner's 'eternal faith to my German fatherland' led to a toxic, though sadly not atypical, anti-Semitism, partly directed, in resentful ingratitude, against Mendelssohn or Meyerbeer, who had helped advance his career. Discussing *Parsifal*, however, director Stefan Herheim insists that Wagner 'actually did not serve as propaganda for Hitler and Nazi racial theory, simply because the work's core deals with a concept that in no way correlates with Fascism: pity!'

ABOUT THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OVERTURE

Gordon Kalton Williams writes:

Pursued by creditors, the 26-year-old Richard Wagner and his wife Minna fled for London in 1839 from Riga in Latvia, where he'd been music director. Their ship, the *Thetis*, was battered by storms and took shelter in a Norwegian cove. There, said Wagner in his memoirs, the idea for his fourth opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, took root. Listening to the overture's stormy opening you could believe this. The real inspiration for the opera, however, may have been Heinrich Heine's *The Recollections of Herr von Schabelewopski* (1834), which contains a version of the Flying Dutchman tale.

Wagner's opera concerns the old legend of a ship's captain (the Dutchman) and his ghostly crew, condemned by a curse to sail the seas unless, and until, the Dutchman can find the redeeming love of a selfless woman. In Wagner's opera, that woman is Senta, who sacrifices her life to save the Dutchman's soul. The overture was written in November 1841. after the rest of the opera. Rather like the overtures of Weber whom Wagner admired. it foreshadows the opera's concerns in its juxtaposition of tempestuous passages, the pacifying effect of 'Senta's Ballad' (cor anglais solo) and the dance-like middle section based on the Scene 7 chorus, 'Steuermann! Lass die Wacht!', which Wagner claimed to have been suggested by the calls of the Thetis's crewmen echoing round the Norwegian cove's granite walls.

The Flying Dutchman was the earliest work that Wagner later acknowledged as part of his canon. Senta was the first of the 'redeemer heroines' he portrayed, and although Wagner was still decades away from the Music Drama with which he changed operatic history, The Flying Dutchman points the way to those operas in its dramatic sweep and insight into human motivation. It still features as a standalone overture of course, but that overture is a superb example of 19th-century nature portraiture.

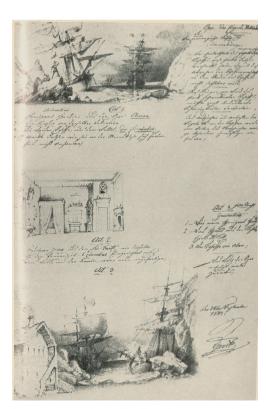
Wagner's overture is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, harp and strings.

The opera premiered at the Königliches Hoftheater Dresden in 1843, with Wagner conducting.

The Sydney Symphony first performed the overture in July 1938, conducted by Joseph Post.

Other notable performances include those led by Georg Szell (1938, 39), Malcolm Sargent (1938, 44), Eugene Goossens (1949), Nicolai Malko (1958), Bernard Heinze (1966) and Jiří Bělohlávek (1991).

Our most recent performance was in July 2013, when Chief Conductor David Robertson conducted the complete opera live in concert.



Stage design sketches for The Flying Dutchman, 1842

FROM THE ARCHIVES



2013 – WAGNER'S FLYING DUTCHMAN IN CONCERT

While today you will be hearing only its rollicking overture, in July 2013 then-Chief Conductor David Robertson lead the Orchestra in concert performances of Wagner's complete *The Flying Dutchman*. The production starred Eric Owens, Orla Boylan, Ain Anger, John Daszak, John Tessier and Sally-Anne Russell and featured the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs directed by Brett Weymark, with Jessica Cottis as assistant conductor.

These performances also featured video projections by video and projection artist S Katy Tucker, projected onto two screens high above the Concert Hall stage, cut into the shape of the cursed ship's sails.

The concerts were a huge hit, with Clive Paget writing in *Limelight* 'this was an evening of unadulterated triumph from start to finish.'

And you can hear more of Wagner's operas in concert when Chief Conductor Simone Young continues our *Ring* Cycle with *Siegfried* (2025) and *Götterdämmerung* (2026).

By Hugh Robertson

ABOUT JEAN SIBELIUS

Finland had been under Swedish rule since the 13th century, and by the 17th had a Swedish gentry and administrative class, into which Sibelius was born in 1865. In 1809. however, Finland was ceded to Tsarist Russia. and became an autonomous Grand Duchy. Initially Russia had encouraged the use of the Finnish language – a non-Indo-European language related to Hungarian, rather than Swedish - but by the end of the 19th century. ruled in increasingly repressive fashion. This was a response to, but inevitably inflamed, the growing movement for national selfdetermination, and Sibelius soon found himself an important symbol of that cultural resistance.

Coming from the Swedish minority, Sibelius had been largely unaware of the richness of 'ethnic' Finnish culture until he became engaged to Aino Järnefelt, whose family was very pro-Finnish, in 1890. The Järnefelt family introduced Sibelius to the mythological and literary culture of the Finns, and the result was a series of works that celebrated Kalevala, the Finnish national epic. He was able to create a Finnish musical language out of the drama of its legends, the typical modal patterns of Finnish folk-song (though he never quoted actual folk-tunes) and the rhythmic imprint of its verse, and to blend these elements with the contemporary idioms of Bruckner, Liszt and Tchaikovsky.

Sibelius produced his first major works in the 1890s, and in July 1900, wrote to his wife, Aino, from Germany: 'I can win a place, I believe, with my music. No, I don't believe; I know I can'. Having launched his symphonic career, at the turn of the 20th century, Sibelius went to create seven of the most important symphonies of the century (and one of its greatest violin concertos) alternating them with other more programmatically 'Finnish' works.



Sibelius c.1900. Source: Finnish Heritage Agency/Wikimedia

There should have been an Eighth Symphony, and correspondence between the composer and conductor Serge Koussevitzky suggests that it was very nearly complete in 1927 when Sibelius burned the score in what his wife called an auto-da-fé.

From then on he produced practically no music for the remaining thirty years of his life. Sibelius had always been profoundly ambiguous about his talent – for every effusion about assembling 'God's mosaic', as he described writing the Fifth Symphony, there is a corresponding note of distrust towards his own work and capability. Moreover, he developed alcoholism fairly early in his career, giving it up (temporarily) only when he was discovered to have tumours growing in his throat as a result of drinking and smoking cigars. He outlived all his doctors, dying in 1957 at the age of 91.

In western Europe, he was increasingly ignored or vilified by modernist composers and commentators as the century went on, while in the USA he was held up as the virile antagonist to the 'decadent, neurotic' music of Schoenberg and his followers. And, sadly, tastemakers in the Third Reich saw in him a 'masculine' composer whose work derived from 'blood and soil', tainting Sibelius by an association that appalled him.

ABOUT THE SECOND SYMPHONY

Sibelius, like Brahms, came relatively late to writing symphonies, producing his First at the age of thirty-three and premiering it in 1899. Like Brahms, though, Sibelius had accrued considerable experience in writing for orchestra. The 1890s saw the composition of works like *Kullervo*, *En saga*, movements which later became the *Karelia* Suite and the original version of the *Lemminkäinen Suite* which depicts heroic tales from the Finnish mythological cycle, the *Kalevala*.

What all these works have in common, of course, is their preoccupation with the myths and legends of Finland and Sibelius' nationalist music was related to a growing political consciousness, but Sibelius always denied that the Second Symphony, which appeared in 1902, had any extramusical significance. The journey it enacts from darkness to light relates it to works of 'absolute' music such as certain Beethoven symphonies, but commentators particularly in Finland – have often argued for its having an implicit program of national liberation. The audiences at its premiere performances certainly thought so: the concerts were sold-out, the audiences ecstatic and the composer acclaimed as a national hero.

Its first movement seems to evoke the pastoral landscapes of Finland, shot through with a sense of incipient grief. During its course the symphony passes through often fragmentary stages of deep melancholy and conflict before emerging in the final movement with one of Sibelius' most stirring and memorable tunes.

In fact, Sibelius began writing music which ended up in the symphony while holidaying in Italy, leading some writers to comment on the more than usually warm textures that he draws from a modestly constituted orchestra. From his correspondence we know he was contemplating at least two projects: a set of tone-poems called *Festivals* and a single movement work – inspired perhaps by Richard Strauss, whom Sibelius had recently met – on the story of *Don Juan*. Out of the sketches for these works, Sibelius fashioned some of his most memorable

gestures: the sinister opening of the second movement, with its soft pizzicato opening, horn calls and bassoon solo was originally to have evoked the figure of Death arriving at Don Juan's castle.

The work may be a document of national liberation, but it is also about the process of unifying and reconciling diverse, often fragmentary, musical gestures, so that the expansive melody of the finale seems the inevitable outcome of all that went before. Five years later. Sibelius would have his much reported meeting with Mahler where he advocated a 'severity of style and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs'. Mahler's response, 'No, the symphony must be like the world and embrace everything' missed the point. In their different ways, they were saying the same thing.

Sibelius' Second Symphony is scored for each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani and strings.

It was premiered by the Helsinki Orchestral Society on 8 March 1902, with the composer conducting.

The Sydney Symhony Orchestra first performed the symphony in March 1940, conducted by Georg Schneevoigt.

Other notable performances include those conducted by Bernard Heinze (1943, 45, 52, 56), Edgar Bainton (1944), Ernest MacMillan (1945), Charles Groves (1950), Joseph Post (1953), John Barbirolli (1955), Nicolai Malko (1957, 58), Malcolm Sargent (1960), John Hopkins (1965, 88), Leif Segerstam (1982), Stuart Challender (1989, 90), Simone Young (1996), Vladimir Ashkenazy (2004), Thomas Dausgaard (2008), Jahja Ling (2011) and Jukka-Pekka Saraste (2018).

Our most recent performances were at Sydney Town Hall in 2021, conducted by Benjamin Northey.

Notes by Gordon Kalton Williams © 2013 (Wagner); Gordon Kerry composer (biographies) © 2025 and Sibelius © 2003.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson.



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Benjamin Northey Conductor in Residence



Vladimir Ashkenazy Conductor Laureate



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Georges Lentz



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TIMPANI



Antoine Siguré Principal



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Timothy Constable Christine Bishop Chair

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