

Meet the New Generation Leading Berlin's Classical Scene

By A.J. Goldmann

Jan. 19, 2018

With three full-time opera houses, seven major symphony orchestras and numerous world-class choirs, all lavishly funded by the German government, Berlin may well be the most musically active city on earth. It has also reached a moment of transition, with the rise of a new generation of young, international musical chiefs. While Daniel Barenboim, 75, remains the dean of the Berlin music scene, and another veteran, 77-year-old Christoph Eschenbach, arrives in 2019 to lead the Konzerthausorchester, many older maestros are passing the baton to a new crop of musical leaders. Here's a look at several of the new arrivals injecting vitality into an already thriving landscape.

Robin Ticciati has been a maestro to watch since 2005, when, at just 22, he became the youngest person ever to conduct at the fabled Teatro alla Scala in Milan. In September, this 34-year-old Londoner took over as the chief conductor and artistic director of the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester (DSO), established in 1946 in West Berlin by the American occupation forces.

Whether helming the Scottish Chamber Orchestra or the Glyndebourne Festival in England — Mr. Ticciati's two other directorships — or making guest appearances at the Met, he has been noted for his enthusiasm and energy. The adventurous program of his inaugural DSO concert in the fall seemed designed to show off the orchestra, and its new maestro, in their chameleonlike diversity. It featured Strauss's showstopping "Also Sprach Zarathustra," together with a French Baroque suite and a large-scale contemporary symphony.

Another Brit arrived in Berlin this season to take over the celebrated RIAS Chamber Choir: In September, **Justin Doyle**, 42, began his tenure as the choir's chief conductor and artistic director, with a two-part concert of sacred works by Monteverdi that moved between Frank Gehry's new Pierre Boulez Saal and St. Hedwig's Cathedral nearby. Under the vast dome of the reconstructed church, Monteverdi's "Missa in illo tempore" wafted around the resonant interior. In Mr. Gehry's elliptical new concert hall, "Vespro della beata vergine" filled the wooden structure to the brim.

Although best known for early music, the repertoire performed by RIAS is wide-ranging. A program this spring will juxtapose Bach and Tomás Luís de Victoria with the 20th-century composers Hans Werner Henze and James MacMillan. "We always live in a continuum. That's what's interesting to me," Mr. Doyle said. "When you're told you only do 'alte Musik,' it's terribly dull being in a pigeonhole."



Gijs Leenaars leading the Rundfunkchor Berlin (Berlin Radio Choir). Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Mr. Doyle also has a long relationship with Opera North in Leeds, England, and his operatic experience should prove useful in RIAS's ongoing project of live recordings of Mozart operas under Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Metropolitan Opera's music director designate. (After a recent performance of "La Clemenza di Tito," the cycle continues this summer in Germany with "Die Zauberflöte.")

The Rundfunkchor Berlin (Berlin Radio Choir) belongs to the city's lively family of public radio ensembles, known as ROC Berlin. In recent years, the Rundfunkchor has become something of a house choir for the Berlin Philharmonic, and won acclaim for its prominent role alongside that orchestra in Peter Sellars's well-traveled staging of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" from 2010.

Since 2015, the group has been steered by the 39-year-old Dutchman **Gijs Leenaars**, who previously led the Netherlands Radio Choir. “Classical music is always under threat in Holland,” he said in an interview, referring to drastic cuts to the country’s cultural budget since 2011. “In this town,” he continued, speaking of Berlin, “culture has such a different position from what it means in my country. Not a day goes by when I don’t notice it.”

The Rundfunkchor regularly works with the city’s orchestras but also develops its own projects, like an immersive version of Brahms’s “A German Requiem” that came to New York for Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival in 2016. In October, the ensemble opened the season with another striking production: A collaboration with the director and designer Robert Wilson, “Luther: Dancing With the Gods” explored the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with music by Bach, Knut Nystedt and Steve Reich backgrounding dramatic scenes.

“Kirill who?” some asked in the summer of 2015, when the Berlin Philharmonic selected a new chief conductor to succeed Simon Rattle. The Russian maestro **Kirill Petrenko** is held in high esteem throughout Europe, but he is far less known (and seen) outside of it. New York audiences will have the rare opportunity to experience his work in late March during a guest performance of the Bavarian State Opera, which he has led since 2013. On the program of his Carnegie Hall debut is “Der Rosenkavalier” by Strauss — for whom, along with Wagner, the conductor is especially revered.

For the 45-year-old Mr. Petrenko, who arrives in Berlin in the summer of 2019, the new job is something of a homecoming: Between 2002 and 2007, he was the general music director at the Komische Oper. But in part because of his reputation as an opera conductor, the philharmonic’s decision caught many by surprise. Last March, he made his first appearance with the orchestra since his appointment in a program that included a smoldering performance of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony.



Justin Doyle, the new chief conductor and artistic director of the RIAS Chamber Choir. Matthias Heyde

“This orchestra has a burning ardor, which must sometimes be held in check in order to let it out at the right moment,” the soft-spoken Mr. Petrenko told the cellist Olaf Maninger in a conversation taped for the orchestra’s Digital Concert Hall platform. “If you know what potential this orchestra has, then as a conductor you want to acknowledge it,” he added with a smile.

Of all these new leaders, **Vladimir Jurowski**, 45, the newly minted chief conductor of the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin (RSB), probably has the busiest international schedule: Since 2007, this fiery Russian has led the London Philharmonic Orchestra. He has another directorship in Moscow, conducts all over Europe and is the only conductor on this list to have significant experience with American orchestras.

Nor is he a stranger to Berlin. After studying at the Hanns Eisler conservatory there, he was a conductor at the Komische Oper from 1997 to 2001. And like Mr. Petrenko, Mr. Jurowski is an opera specialist. He spent a dozen years leading Glyndebourne (Mr. Ticciati is his successor) and won praise for performances of Strauss’s “Die Frau ohne Schatten” at the Metropolitan Opera in 2013 and Berg’s “Wozzeck” at last summer’s Salzburg Festival.

Perhaps this affinity for opera has shaped Mr. Jurowski’s flair for the dramatic. So far his first season at the RBS — the oldest of Berlin’s radio orchestras, founded in 1923 — included a thunderous performance of Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony (featuring the Rundfunkchor), as well as that composer’s rarely heard orchestrations of Beethoven’s Third and Fifth Symphonies. Mr. Jurowski “countered megalomania with a depth and tonal vastness that make many recordings look pale,” the Berlin newspaper Tagesspiegel wrote.

Anyone following classical music in Berlin is aware of the flowering of the Komische Oper, the most rebellious and unconventional of the city's three opera houses, under its artistic director, Barrie Kosky. Next season the company welcomes **Ainars Rubikis**, a 39-year-old Latvian, as its general music director, a post once occupied by Kurt Masur (and by Mr. Petrenko).

After winning conducting competitions in Bamberg, Germany, in 2010, and Salzburg, Austria, in 2011, Mr. Rubikis was the music director of the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater in Russia from 2012 to 2014. This summer, he will make an early debut as the Komische's director with Mr. Kosky's production of Shostakovich's "The Nose."



Matthias Schulz, the incoming general manager of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Isa Foltin/Getty Images

Nor is he Mr. Kosky's only youthful find. The house's new Kapellmeister (or, roughly, house conductor) **Jordan de Souza**, 29, opened the season with a gripping performance of Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande."

Matthias Schulz, 40, the incoming general manager, or intendant, of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, is the only native German among Berlin's crop of young musical leaders. From 2012 to 2016, he led the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, and he is expected to draw on his background in both music (he is a classically trained pianist) and finance (he studied economics in his native Munich) as the manager of Berlin's oldest opera company. Unlike past intendants, however, Mr. Schulz will not stage operas for the company, which has just moved back to its historic home following a seven-year renovation.

According to Mr. Barenboim, the music director since 1992, the Staatsoper is now making an effort to attract individual and corporate sponsorship in a country lacking a strong tradition of private philanthropy.

"I've worked in Europe, in Paris, here and in Chicago. I know both systems," Mr. Barenboim said. "In Chicago, it's zero public money, and in Berlin it's practically zero private money. And neither system can work in the world in the 21st century. It needs a mixture."

Mr. Barenboim called Mr. Schulz's appointment, which was suggested by the outgoing general manager, Jürgen Flimm, a "very smooth transition."

"He's very open-minded," Mr. Barenboim added. "We will continue to do new operas, to commission new pieces. We are attempting to start every season with something unusual."

"I want to show that artistic passion does not exclude economic sense," Mr. Schulz said. For Berlin, a city that is a financial drain on Europe's most successful economy, as well as a cultural mecca whose former mayor proudly proclaimed it "poor but sexy," this proposal sounds both astute and, well, mature.