

Guest conductor masters PSO roles

By [Mark Kanny](#)

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There were many compelling aspects to the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra concert guest conductor Donald Runnicles led Friday night in Heinz Hall.

The gently reflective spirit that opens Nancy Galbraith's "Euphonic Blues" proved an alluring way to start the concert. The nine-minute piece is impressive in its emotional range, rewarding for the course of its musical ideas and masterly in its orchestral palette. Reminiscent in some ways of the era of Aaron Copland and Roy Harris, it was a joy to discover and received a standing ovation.

Runnicles led a deeply musical performance — in pacing, balance and knowing when to let flute soloist Lorna MaGhee's artistry take the lead.

He set the stage most effectively for piano soloist Stephen Hough in Felix Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor. But more remarkable was that burning insistence Hough brought to the piano part, which can too easily become just busy.

He made the piano sing beautifully in the slow movement, set up well by the cello section, and fully conveyed the joie de vivre of the finale.

After intermission Runnicles led extensive excerpts from Richard Wagner's "The Ring of the Nibelungen" with a large orchestra, which included nine horn players and two timpanists.

The second half began with "The Ride of the Valkyries" but continued with the much-less known "Forest Murmurs," a delightful evocation of nature.

The concert concluded with the three big excerpts from the "Ring's" final opera, "Die Gotterdammerung." "Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey" began quite slowly. Principal horn William Caballero went off-stage to play his big solo — with immense sound reminiscent of his solos in Mahler's Fifth Symphony — then rushed back in for an ensemble solo.

Runnicles started "Siegfried's Funeral Music" many pages before where the excerpt usually begins, even earlier than Arturo Toscanini, whose performances were labeled "Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music." Timpanist Edward Stephan and trumpeter George Vosburgh were superb.

The concert concluded with a shortened version of the "Immolation Scene," mostly well-paced and played, except for the low brass, which was too loud at the last appearance of an important lyrical theme. It was an uncharacteristic moment because Runnicles balanced the orchestra very well.

This concert will be repeated at 2:30 p.m. Sunday in Heinz Hall, Downtown. Admission is \$25.75 to \$105.75. Details: 412-392-4900 or www.pittsburghsymphony.org.

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