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## Chicago SO/Haitink at Lucerne Festival

Richard Morrison

Next week Bernard Haitink returns to the Festival Hall for two concerts with his “new” band, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, whose principal conductor he became two years ago. At the Lucerne Festival last weekend, in Jean Nouvel’s stunning Konzertsaal, I had a preview of what London can expect. It’s glorious. Haitink may be 80 and a touch unsteady on his pins, but his authority is undimmed. Where would concert life be without those indomitable octogenarians — Davis, Boulez, Haitink, Mackerras — who reveal so much about the music, rather than their own egos?

One of Haitink’s finest interpretations with his old band, the Concertgebouw, was of Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony. If anything, it’s even better with Chicago. The brass, particularly the Wagner tubas, have a lustrous darkness that suits both the velvety pianissimo opening, the great adagio and the thrilling fortissimo at its climax. The violins are sweet and intense. And there’s a new joyousness, a spring in the step, about the way that Haitink phrases the finale, after so much monumental profundity earlier.

But the textures are astonishingly diaphanous throughout — given that this is Bruckner, not Telemann. That makes those trademark moments of brooding Haitink anguish all the more searching. One mesmerising crescendo over a drum roll, towards the first movement’s conclusion, seemed to distil a lifetime of pent-up emotion into 60 seconds.

The night before, his interpretation of Shostakovich’s enigmatic and elegiac Symphony No 15 was no less gripping, and very affecting. This is Shostakovich mulling over his life, career and perhaps (via those weird Rossini and Wagner allusions) the whole of musical history — trying to make sense of it, or not. It’s hardly fanciful to imagine Haitink doing the same thing. The never-ending ending, with woodwind and percussion inexorably and chillingly tick-tocking the future into the past, was the most haunting thing I have experienced all year.

Sadly, you can’t hear that in London. We are apparently deemed too lowbrow for Shostakovich, so Brahms’s First Symphony has been substituted. Ugh. But Haitink’s gloriously light-fingered account of Haydn’s “Clock” Symphony is coming. In his ninth decade, he can still quickstep with the best.