



# Interviewing Abbado

A journalistic encounter with Claudio Abbado is so rare that many great colleagues have joined in, courtesy of **Geoffrey Norris**

**E**ver since his debut at Milan's Teatro alla Scala in 1960, Claudio Abbado has collaborated with and inspired many of the great instrumentalists and singers of the day. Given his renowned intensity of focus during rehearsals, not to mention his well-known ability to convey his thoughts through gesture rather than the spoken word, we invited some of them to pose questions that they might not have had the opportunity to ask while they were preparing a performance. They range over a wide spectrum, from Abbado's processes of learning a score to his breadth of artistic interests, his attitudes towards contemporary works and his plans for the future. The questions were put to Abbado when I visited his Bologna home for a rare audience. It is no surprise that his responses reveal a man with a limitless passion for music and one who searches deeply for the solutions to its interpretation.

For half a century Abbado has been at the forefront of concert and operatic life, first as music director at La Scala for almost two decades from 1968 to 1986, then at the Vienna State Opera (1986-91). He was chief conductor at the Berlin Philharmonic from 1989 to 2002, having previously been in charge of the London Symphony Orchestra (1979-87). Nowadays his energies are concentrated on the hand-picked Lucerne Festival Orchestra, which he established in 2003, and on the Bologna-based Orchestra Mozart, founded the following year. If in recent times his workload has had to be reduced in the aftermath of an operation for stomach cancer, his appearances on the podium have lost none of their compelling authority or their capacity to generate awe at the powers of perception that they manifest.


Nor has Abbado lost his powers of persuasion. After a gap of 16 years he agreed to return to La Scala in June this year to conduct Mahler's mighty *Resurrection* Symphony on condition that the city of Milan

planted 90,000 trees. This was not a case of "blackmail", as Abbado is swift to emphasise, but La Scala was so keen to have him back that the planting was duly agreed (although the city of Milan later reneged). The performances, unfortunately, did not go ahead, because, after a series of concerts in Berlin, Abbado was instructed by his doctors to rest.

Abbado is hoping to exercise even further the same spirit and influence that nearly prevailed with the Milan authorities, by setting up in Italy a scheme for the young similar to El Sistema in Venezuela. He has worked extensively with the Simón Bolívar Orchestra and has had a vital impact on the careers of its young conductors, Gustavo Dudamel and Diego Matheuz. Abbado has enlisted the help of José Antonio Abreu, the force behind El Sistema, which involves youngsters in music

and orchestral playing as a way of giving them a sense of hope, purpose and pride. He first met Abreu in 1999 while touring South America with the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra and was indelibly impressed by what he saw. "In Italy," Abbado says, "we are going to do the same thing, in each

region, from top to toe." While he does not envisage the government laying out any or many funds for the project, he has a good number of wealthy contacts who are all enthused by the idea. "Everywhere now there are friends who are working for this project," he says, convinced that the scheme will come to full fruition.

So, despite the broken promise of a newly tree-lined city and province of Milan, Abbado could well leave a legacy of root-and-branch change to Italy's social and cultural fabric, alongside his vast and varied catalogue of recordings. It is characteristic of a man whose visions extend much farther than the podium, the concert hall or the opera house. Apropos of the Italian youth scheme, he maintains that "one is enriched by culture". The same is true of the maestro himself. 

*'His appearances on the podium have lost none of their compelling authority'*

## ALAN GILBERT

*The music director of the New York Philharmonic has long been an ardent follower of Abbado's artistry.*

**I've always admired the way you learn music and would love to get some insight into how, specifically, you do it. Would you be willing to tell us about your study process?**

I love to read books, I love literature, I like to read scores and music. Normally I like things so much that I start to read them once, and then again and again until the moment I know them by heart. I always think I don't know enough. There is no limit to what you can know about a piece. Every time I relook at a piece I have conducted many times, I start

again from the beginning. With a new piece I try to know more about the composer but normally I conduct music of composers that I know. I will study anything that helps to know more about a piece, not just the music but the cultural background, letters, paintings, architecture or life.

## MAURIZIO POLLINI

*A close friend and colleague of Abbado's, Pollini has performed with him on numerous occasions in a repertoire ranging from Beethoven to Bartók.*

**In what way do you think contemporary music is important for our musical life and culture?**

It's very simple. If you think back to the time of Beethoven, he was a contemporary composer. And many people didn't understand him. So any time you have a great composer, you should try to understand, to listen. Today's the same. I play music of Boulez, of Stockhausen, and I like it very much. I conduct a lot of Luigi Nono and Berio. Each country has wonderful composers.

## JOSÉ VAN DAM

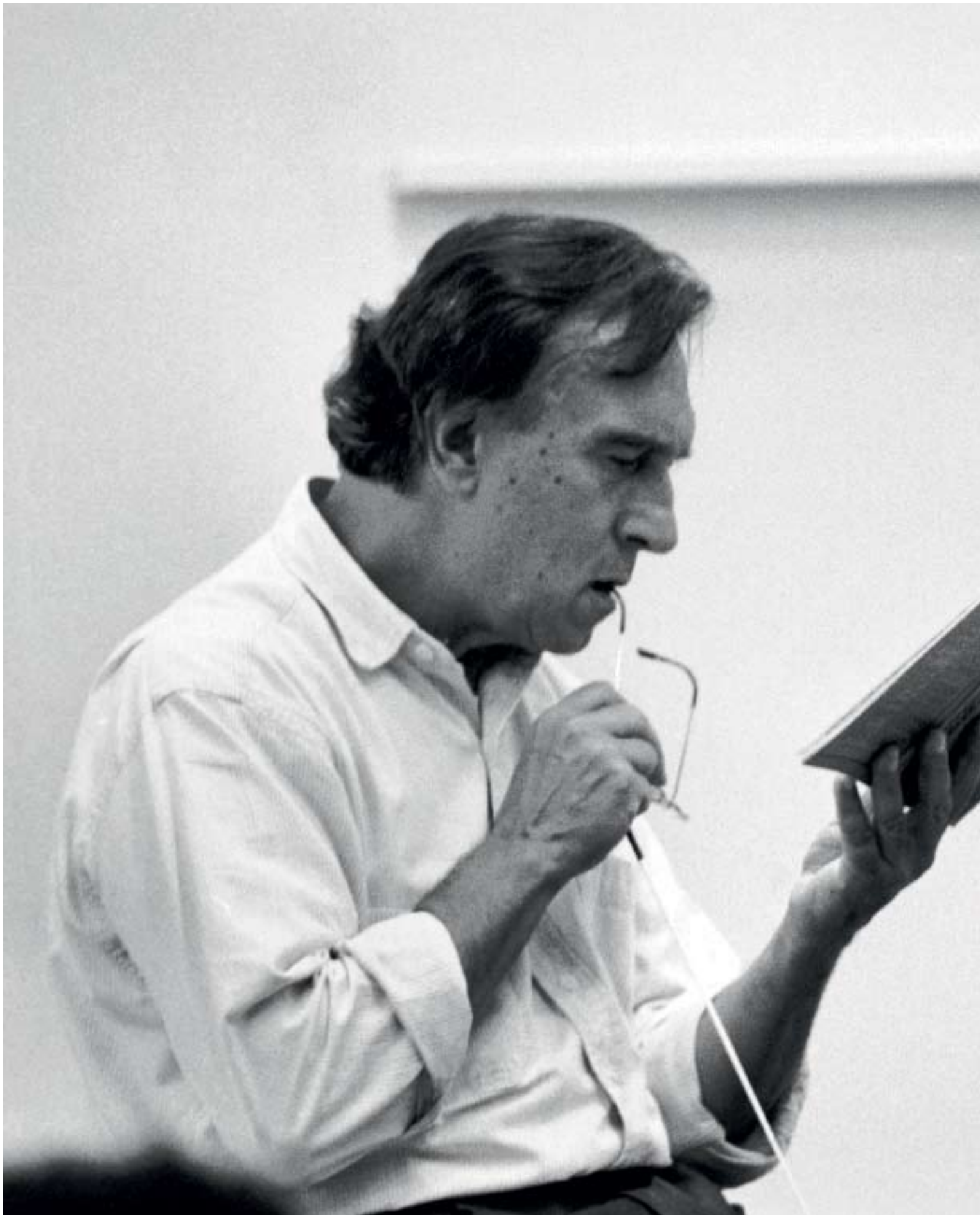
*The Belgian bass-baritone has performed many times with Abbado, notably on a celebrated recording of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande for DG.*

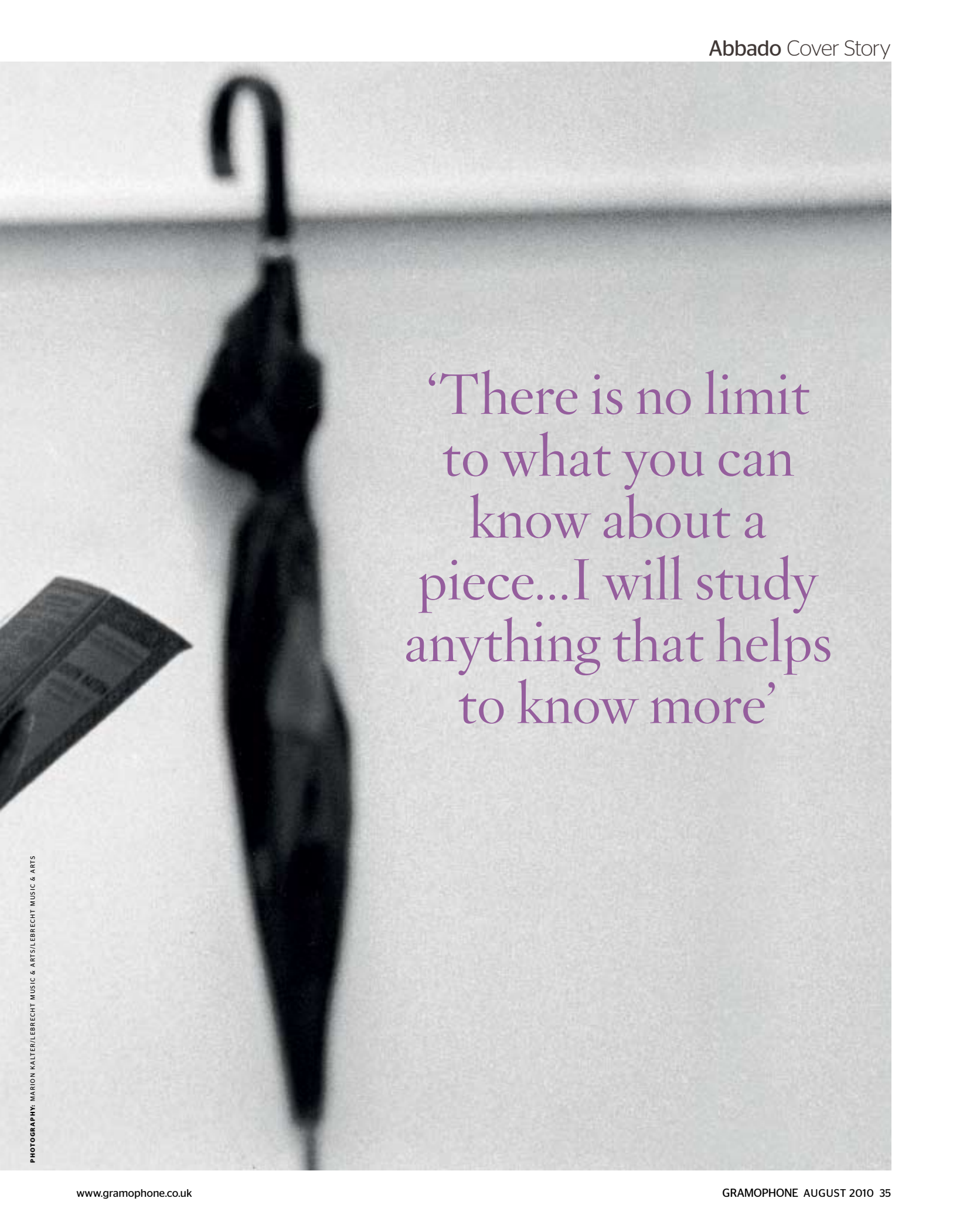
**We all know that you excel in many different areas of the repertoire, be it Italian, German**



**Claudio Abbado  
rehearsing with  
Maurizio Pollini  
in Paris in 1988**

PHOTOGRAPHY: T. MARTINOT/LEBRECHT MUSIC & ARTS



A black and white photograph of a closed umbrella and a newspaper against a light background. The umbrella is dark and stands vertically, with its curved handle at the top. To the left, a portion of a newspaper is visible, showing some text and a small image. The background is a plain, light-colored wall or surface.

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**or French, but I'd like to know which music you find difficult to empathise with and perhaps to understand.**

No music is easy. But what I don't like is limits. José doesn't speak of Russian music. I conduct Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky and Prokofiev and Shostakovich. I don't like limits, so I don't see why I shouldn't love French music, English music, Russian music, Austrian, or even Italian music. I like good music.

## THOMAS QUASTHOFF

*With Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic, Quasthoff won a Grammy Award in 2000 for the recording of Mahler's Des Knaben Wunderhorn.*

**What significance has the Lied and Lieder-singing had on your artistic life and artistic interpretation?**

I always love to play or conduct Lieder, and I think some of the best recordings that Thomas Quasthoff, Anne Sofie von Otter and I did together were of Lieder from Mozart onwards, up to Mahler and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the complete cycles. For me, Mahler wrote operas in the form of symphonic pieces. In Lieder the meaning of the text is very important. In Italy we have wonderful theatres and a great tradition for opera but one of the greatest aspects of culture in Germany, Austria, England, France and middle Europe is the song with text. It is one of the greatest forms of expression.

## CHRISTOPHER ALDER

*The distinguished record producer has collaborated with Abbado on many of his CDs.*

**When you start studying a piece you have performed earlier, do you listen to your recording or deliberately try to distance yourself from any previous concept?**

No, I try to study again, and fortunately in a life you can always find something new. It would be boring always to do the same thing in the same way. But I try to find new, important things. Sometimes I listen to my old recordings and think, "Oh my God, what was I doing there?". And sometimes I think, "That's not bad. Something good."

## GIL SHAHAM

*In one of his last concerts as chief of the Berlin Philharmonic, Abbado conducted Gil Shabam in*

*Brabms's Violin Concerto at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo.*

**What advice or suggestions do you have for today's musicians - composers, conductors and (especially) instrumentalists? What should we do to improve our art?**

To listen more and to enjoy the music. To love music. There is a great passion for music everywhere, even in Italy where some years ago it was not so. The musician should be open to play from Baroque music to the modern avant-garde. There shouldn't be any limits. Always try to find good music. I remember after the war they were saying about Bartók and Stravinsky that it's not music - it's percussion, just noise. Today almost everybody would say that it's classic music. The problem today is to know which ones are the good composers.

## SIMON KEENLYSIDE

*The English baritone has sung with Abbado in concert and in the opera house, notably in a Ferrara production of Mozart's Don Giovanni.*

**How do you control the dynamic between singers on the stage and the orchestra at your feet? Do you consciously have a method to instil trust without losing control?**

Normally I try to find a good balance so that the musicians can listen to the singers. Of course, in opera or in concerts, the voice might be accompanied by the orchestra or sometimes the orchestra is even more important, so the singer must follow the orchestral line. Listening is one of the most important things.

## ROBERTO ALAGNA

*Alagna's recordings with Abbado have included the celebrated Verdi's Requiem.*

**Is it possible to describe your vision of the music in terms of other images?**

I love painting. I go always to see new exhibitions. There's a lot of music where I can see connections with paintings but normally, just as in literature I read a book for the book, so I read music for the music. I speak very little with the orchestra. We have a good communication with the eyes or the hands, and they understand. All the musicians in the Orchestra Mozart play chamber music. If you know how to play quartets and quintets, that's the best way.

## BARBARA BONNEY

*Barbara Bonney sang frequently with Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic, notably in Brabms's German Requiem.*

**How are you able to paint pictures in the air with your beautiful hands? I always felt like I was floating on clouds when I sang with you.**

I always imagined I was flying with Barbara.

## JONAS KAUFMANN

*The German tenor first sang Lohengrin in Munich last year.*

**What particular reasons are there for your love of Lohengrin? Why do you think it is often described as Wagner's "Italian" opera? And why does one so seldom hear from singers what Wagner says he was looking for - "German" expression coupled with bel canto style?**

With the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, we did a recording with Jonas Kaufmann of opera arias by Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven and Wagner. I think he's a great singer and I like

## Five essential Abbado recordings

**Mahler** Symphony No 6 (BPO)

DG ④ ② 477 5684GSA2 (9/05)

*Gramophone's Recording of the Year in 2006, Abbado back in front of the orchestra of which he was chief until 2002.*

**Rossini** *Il viaggio a Reims* (BPO)

Sony ④ ② S2K53336 (12/93)

*Abbado's second star-studded recording of an opera in whose re-evaluation he played a major part during the 1980s.*

**Mozart** *Die Zauberflöte* (Mahler CO)

DG ④ ② 477 5789GH2 (6/06)

*Abbado came late to the Flute but turned in a recording of alertness and wit.*

**Beethoven** *Pf Concs Nos 2 & 3* (Argerich)

DG ④ 477 5026GH (1/05)

*Abbado and the Mahler CO match the mercurial pianist all the way.*

**Mussorgsky** *Boris Godunov*

Sony ④ ③ S3K58977 (5/94)

*More luxury casting and a preference for Mussorgsky's original orchestrations.*



Pianist Yuja Wang performing with Abbado at last year's Lucerne Festival

him very much. *Lobengrin* is a great opera and more lyric, say, than *Tristan*, but I don't like to make classifications of opera. As to the question about seldom hearing what Wagner was looking for, the answer is that there are not too many good singers like Jonas Kaufmann.

#### ROBERTO ALAGNA

**What do you think about variation in pitch? Do you think it can be raised any higher?**

We have problems with pitch when we are playing Baroque music. Sometimes the instruments have to play at 415kHz or 440kHz or 442kHz. If you go to Vienna, it is 447kHz. Of course, if it is higher it makes the sound more brilliant. It depends very much on the acoustics. In Vienna, for example, it is quite high, but the acoustics of the Musikverein are so warm that it is not bad. I remember in Berlin they used to play at 444kHz; with the Orchestra Mozart we play at 442kHz, although with Pergolesi we have to lower the pitch, especially if you have an oboe d'amore at 415kHz. When singers say the pitch is too high, I always say, "What about the basses? If the pitch is lower, they have to sing lower". As to its being raised further, I think Vienna's 447kHz is already quite high.

#### GIL SHAHAM

**Do you have plans to come to the USA soon? Many of us miss your music-making!**

I would like to go tomorrow but my problem is that after my operation I have to reduce my work. I'm doing just one programme with the Berlin Philharmonic, two at the Lucerne

Festival and three with the Orchestra Mozart, together with Berg's *Lulu* at the Salzburg Festival. Who knows, maybe we will go to the USA with the Orchestra Mozart.

**Have you been back to Teatro Massimo?**

Palermo is the town of my mother and I'd like to go back if I have time. I love Palermo. The Teatro Massimo is beautiful. That and the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples are to my mind better than La Scala. We speak always of La Scala. Yes, it's beautiful, but Palermo and Napoli are even better.

#### YUJA WANG

*The young Chinese pianist dazzled audiences with her performance with Abbado of Prokofiev's Third Concerto at the Lucerne Festival last year.*

**You have conducted many pianists like Martha Argerich and Hélène Grimaud – pianists I greatly respect and admire. How does conducting us change from generation**

**to generation? Was conducting pianists back when you began your career different from conducting us now? Do you approach conducting the younger generation of pianists from a different perspective?**

When I was studying piano together with Martha Argerich, she was 11 or 12 and we did concerts immediately, because I thought she was a great player. I think the first time we played in Berlin with Martha Argerich in Prokofiev and Ravel was my first recording with the Berlin Philharmonic. With soloists I always say what I think about the music and we always try to find the best approach. But I don't understand the distinction between young and old. I remember when I was playing with Arthur Rubinstein or with Rudolf Serkin. Serkin was for me the youngest spirit; he was 88 and we recorded many Mozart concertos. I was always saying to the orchestra, "Look, the youngest here is Rudy." 🎧

#### Future plans

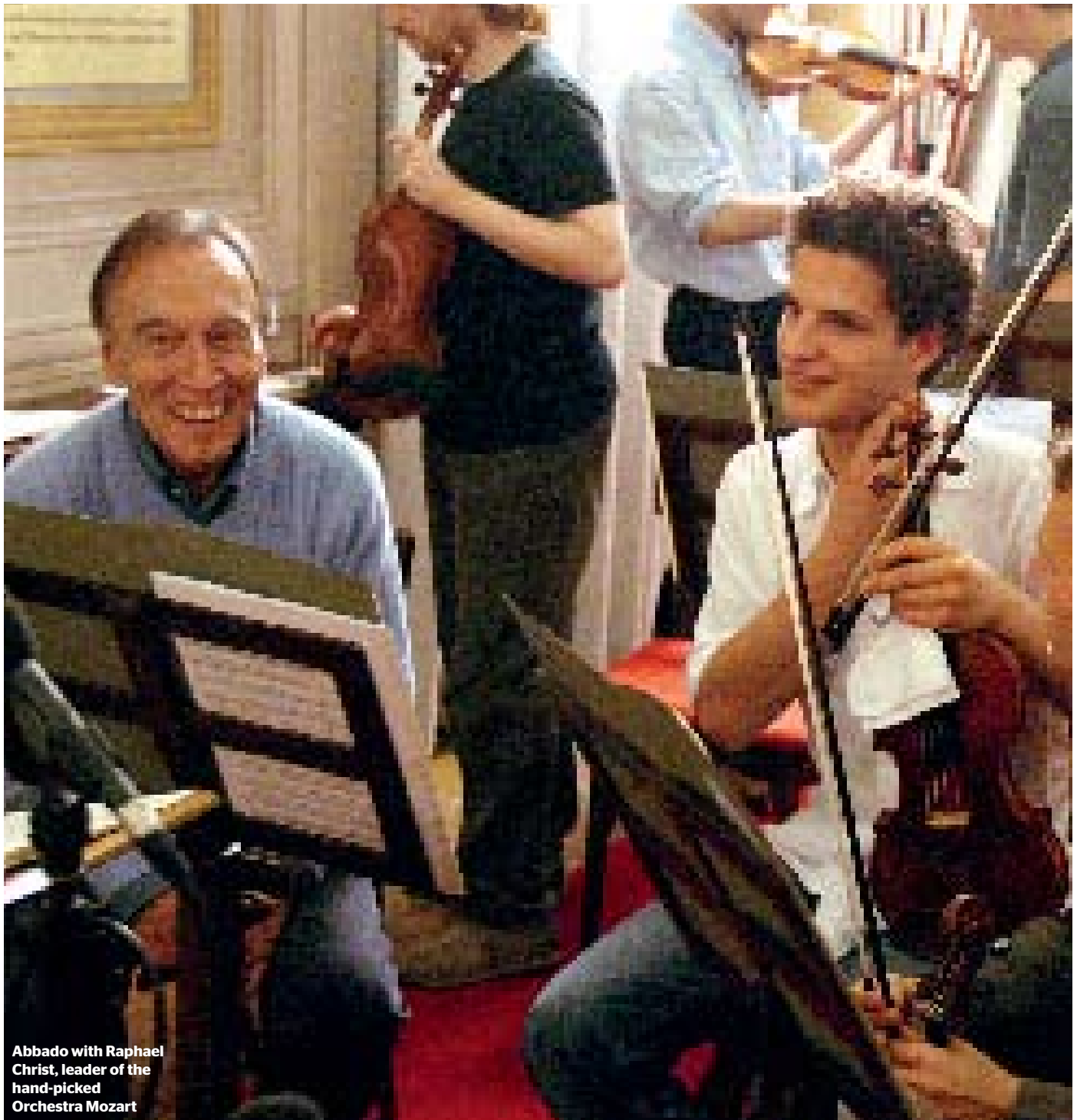
Live performances at Claudio Abbado's Lucerne Festival this year include two concerts of **Beethoven's Fidelio** on August 12 and 14, starring Nina Stemme as Leonore and Jonas Kaufmann as Florestan, and two of **Mahler's Ninth Symphony** on August 20 and 21. There are plenty of recordings on their way, not least the **Fidelio**, to be recorded by Decca. A DVD of **Mahler's First Symphony** is out now and one of **Mahler's Fourth Symphony** is also

imminent, again with the Lucerne Festival forces; both are on DG. Also forthcoming are **Bach's Brandenburg Concertos**, due in November, and the recent **Pergolesi cycle** will be released as a box-set in October.

In 2011 Abbado will join forces with the young pianist he has championed, Yuja Wang, for **Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2**, with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. He and his Orchestra Mozart will record **Mozart's Horn Concertos** with Alessio Allegri, and later his **Wind Concertos**.

# *Joyful music-making*

Claudio Abbado's musicianship is an inspiration to countless players who flock to work with him. **Geoffrey Norris** speaks to some of them



Abbado with Raphael Christ, leader of the hand-picked Orchestra Mozart



Above and below: Claudio Abbado and the Orchestra Mozart recording and performing music by Pergolesi in advance of the composer's tercentenary

Abbado tells a sinister story of a call he received from the local Mafia while he was in Chicago to conduct the symphony orchestra. "I went to my room," he recalls. "The telephone rang and a voice said, 'We are prepared to do anything you want. You want to eliminate someone? We are with you.'"

As it happens, the mild-mannered maestro had nobody on his hit list and remained mute. The secret of dealing with the Mafia, he maintains, "is not to say one word". Much the same principle governs his approach to rehearsing orchestras. While he is genial, humorous and open in casual conversation, Abbado chooses other, less voluble means of expression when he is making music. "He doesn't really need to say anything," reveals Raphael Christ, leader of Abbado's Orchestra Mozart, founded in Bologna in 2004. "He does it with his hands. You are made to listen and to realise that, for example, there is a flute or a second oboe that has an interesting voice, and that maybe you are not so important. He forces you to be very attentive and to make chamber music in a large orchestra. It's the most special thing I have ever seen."

The Orchestra Mozart, of which Abbado has been music director ever since its Bologna debut, is one of several bespoke ensembles – including the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra – in which he has been the guiding spirit over recent years. Acclaimed recordings for DG and Archiv have included music by Pergolesi and the eponymous Mozart but the repertoire of live concerts extends far beyond into the Romantic era, with a performance of Berlioz's massive *Te Deum* (bolstered by a complement of Italian youth orchestras) being a notable landmark in 2008. When I visited Bologna in April, Natalia Gutman, the celebrated international cellist and a principal of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, was appearing as soloist in Schumann's Cello Concerto. As she commented, "When I come here to the Orchestra Mozart, I know many people from Lucerne. I feel as though I am part of a group. Normally, things are more distant between an orchestra and a soloist, and of course I don't know so many people. But here I feel very much part of a family – we are all friends coming together and playing as if it were chamber music."

This talk of chamber music in an orchestral context will be familiar to anybody who has witnessed Abbado conducting even the broadest of symphonic and operatic canvases. His approach in working with Orchestra Mozart is an illuminating microcosm of his attitudes and reception elsewhere. Whether in the Berlin Philharmonic or in smaller ensembles, he has an uncanny ability to make his musicians aware of one another, to encourage them to be malleable in their responses and at the same time to focus on his lucid,

penetrating interpretative conception of a piece. There is no doubt that he likes working with musicians he knows well and who react readily to his inspirational *modus operandi*. For the Orchestra Mozart he chooses his own players, many of whom are recognisable either from the Lucerne and Mahler orchestras or from major positions in Europe's long-established, august concert-giving institutions – the Berlin Philharmonic, for example, or the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. In return, he receives from his artists a potent blend of admiration, respect and affection, and a level of performance second to none. While Abbado has undertaken most of the conducting of the Orchestra Mozart's projects himself, he has also opened up opportunities for the young, including his protégé, 25-year-old Diego Matheuz, a graduate of Venezuela's El Sistema and now the Mozart's principal guest conductor.

Speaking to Abbado, there is a strong sense that he wants not so much

to instruct the young as to help them understand the joys and intimacies of music-making and to make the act and art of re-creating a musical work a mutually fulfilling experience. And this is something that his players recognise and share. There are no rules, no "limits", as Abbado is fond of saying. No union official is on hand to blow the whistle when a tea break is due or lunchtime beckons. Playing for him, as many of the musicians I spoke to in Bologna affirmed, is a tonic, and they cannot get enough of it. As Natalia Gutman says, "The special thing is that people want to be there, for the sake of the music, for the sake of Claudio. The rehearsal might be 20 minutes longer, one hour longer, but we want to have the best result, so

that everybody feels happy with what we are doing."

I vividly remember a concert Abbado gave in Lucerne in 2008 to mark the 70th anniversary of its festival with gripping performances of Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky, and a poetic, probing realisation of the orchestral parts' colours and emotional implications in Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. As in Lucerne, so in the Orchestra Mozart and everywhere Abbado conducts, his deep-rooted instincts and the

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capacity to convey them are breathtaking. The impact of that Lucerne Festival occasion is underlined by Raphael Christ in his responses to playing under Abbado's baton: "The special quality is the joy, the energy that all the musicians have. It is an honour to be

allowed to be here in Bologna and to make music." Any misapprehension that this is merely a job is allayed by the passion that Abbado ignites. "Everybody plays their heart and soul out. Every single player – even if it's one bang on the triangle – is so involved. Abbado creates a very special atmosphere, which gives us – and him – so much strength." ©

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