



## CLASSICAL MUSIC

**Lucerne Festival  
Orchestra/Abbado**

Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★★

**Andrew Clark**

The quality of London's orchestral life is so consistently high that the exceptional is all the more astonishing when it comes. And it came with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra on Monday. This is what a festival should be about – rethinking the basics, banishing routine, striving to create something not normally possible. On all three counts this orchestra and this conductor have succeeded. They demonstrated it four years ago on their first joint visit to London, and they have now repeated the feat.

That they did so not with Mahler, Abbado's forte, but within the more formal confines of Bruckner, makes the achievement all the more noteworthy. Abbado's Bruckner – on this occasion the Fifth Symphony – remains *sui generis*, but it works now on its own terms in a way it never did in the 1980s and 1990s. In typical Abbado style, all the symphonic contours were softened, the structural "uprights" dissolved, the silences curtailed in the interests of the Italian conductor's always linear approach to the classical symphony. Tempi were too flowing to bring out the monumental majesty in Bruckner's edifices, textures too well

blended – too beautiful – to sound ponderous. This was Bruckner sunny side up, lending a *molto espressivo* bloom to the string cantilenas in the opening movement and a *con amore* sparkle to the brass chorales of the Adagio and finale.

How far this was pure Abbado and how far it reflected his handpicked ensemble is an open question. I spotted two former front-desk players from the Berlin Philharmonic who played an ultra-Germanic kind of Bruckner under Herbert von Karajan a generation ago – but the average age of the Lucerners must be less than 40, many of them drawn from the Mahler Chamber

Orchestra. Their playing retains a fabulously chamber-like quality, evidenced by the fluid interplay of the symphony's contrapuntal lines and the way everyone dialogued with Mitsuko Uchida in the Schumann Piano Concerto. This was an electrifying account, spring-coiled in attack and blissfully free of affectation in more reflective passages, each of which Uchida branded with her fearless imagination and dazzling fingers.

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