



CLASSICAL MUSIC

**Lucerne Festival
Orchestra/Abbado**

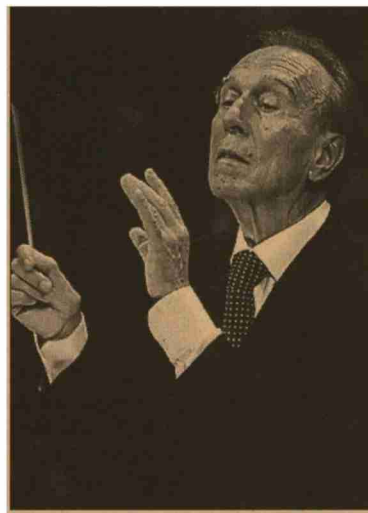
KKL Concert Hall, Lucerne

★★★★☆

Shirley Apthorp

This time, there is no mystical silence when the last notes die away. The audience at Lucerne's KKL bursts into rapturous applause almost instantly. Claudio Abbado, who last year commanded a two-minute pause for reflection after a shattering Mahler's 9th, this year let the tension go.

Bruckner's huge, dark 5th symphony is harder to love than Mahler. Bruckner grapples audibly and at length with his fate, through strange shifts of weather and mood. With his handpicked Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Abbado once again has the sort of ensemble



Polished: conductor Claudio Abbado

that would have to be disqualified if music were a sporting event – too good to be true, too expensive to be fair, and with the unreasonable advantage that all its members are passionately loyal to their maestro. That never happens in everyday orchestral life. Usually the price a festival orchestra pays for the frisson is a lack of collective sound culture, but this orchestra, now in its ninth year, certainly has that.

For all that, it is a high-risk business. Often, seeing Abbado conduct feels like watching a blind tightrope walker. He feels his way forwards with distressing fragility. An abyss yawns below. When a series of string pizzicati passages fails to come together, you glimpse the extent of the danger. When Abbado lets the brass blaze and the strings scream, you feel the full force of what could go wrong. Yet at least as striking is the patient logic of the architecture that Abbado brings to this sprawling symphony, the way he can load a phrase with acerbic pessimism, the delicacy of the quiet passages, and the sheer polish of the orchestral sound.

In Mozart's Haffner Symphony (KV 385), which opened last Friday's concert, Abbado chose a tempo so fast for the opening movement that it seemed doomed to become derailed. As if that were not enough, he pulled sudden tricks with phrasing, and packed each theme with surprises. It would have been exhibitionistic if it had been even slightly less elegant, or ill-advised if it had – as happened in the following evening's concert arias – in fact come apart. As it was, it was playful in the best sense of the word, feather-light and joyous.

The Lucerne Festival continues until September 18, www.lucernefestival.ch