

Lucerne Festival Orchestra, KKL, Lucerne

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The last movement is well under way when a woodwind soloist comes in a beat too early. Claudio Abbado holds up his lean left hand, palm outwards, in unambiguous command. It is half a bar before the winds find their way back together and, in the space of those few notes, you can feel 118 musicians break into a cold sweat. Tension on stage had already seemed at breaking point. It rises. For the last bars of Mahler's ninth symphony, Abbado lets the stage lights dim and pulls the tempo back to a point just short of absurdity. The strings, already playing softer than a whisper, are forced to a pianissimo that is barely louder than thought. Nobody in the audience dares move a muscle, even when the final note fades to nothing.

Abbado, now in full command of every person in the hall, holds the silence. The seconds drag past. Still he holds. A minute stretches into eternity and, when a few gentle coughs break the hush, listeners begin to shift in their seats and exchange glances of incredulity. Abbado gives no quarter. Obedient, the audience falls back into reverential silence, until finally, after more than two minutes, the conductor lets his right hand drop to his side and the stunned public eases its way into a standing ovation.

Now in its eighth year, the Lucerne Festival Orchestra and Abbado still walk the razor's edge between life and death. The consummate loyalty that Abbado's visible battle with cancer won from his players when he first brought them together remains. Abbado's hands describe vague curves in the air, and a handpicked ensemble of the world's best orchestral musicians works together to give better than their best, never free of the fear that this time might be the last. How does it work?

What happens in Lucerne goes beyond technique. Even if this is not the best Mahler you will ever hear, Abbado has the charisma to make you believe that it is.

Some things went wrong at Friday's sold-out concert. There were lapses in ensemble, slips in intonation, moments when the tension failed to hold. But by the time the orchestra tours to Madrid and Paris in October, the piece will no doubt have evolved. For this first performance, the feverish intensity that makes this orchestra so special dominated.

Abbado's view of Mahler's ninth is ultimately more ethereal than gritty, and there are one or two dynamic markings that he chooses to ignore for the sake of elegance. But he lets the brass bite and the winds shriek, the basses grunt and the bass drum thunder. Both rage and mortal terror precede the transcendent final bars. It is not perfect but it is utterly human, which is perhaps worth even more. (★★★★★)

Festival runs until September 18.

www.lucernefestival.ch

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