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## He's a giant of the art

Martin Kettle first heard Claudio Abbado conduct 45 years ago.  
He reflects on a lifetime of listening

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**Martin Kettle**

guardian.co.uk, Monday 10 October 2011 12.52 BST

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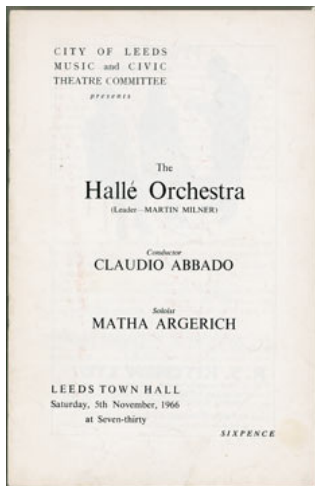


Claudio Abbado conducting the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, 2007. Photograph: Priska Ketterer

Claudio Abbado and I go back a long way together. Forty-five years next month, in fact. Not that I can claim an acquaintance with the great man - though I have interviewed him once, where I recall we talked about Italian politics (Abbado is a quiet socialist) almost as much as we discussed Pelléas et Mélisande, which he was due to conduct. But I now realise that, as a sixth former in Leeds, I was in the audience for what was only his second concert in this country. Tonight I'll be in the Festival Hall for what, without being morbid, is likely to be one of his last British visits. Abbado is, after all, 78 now, his health has been precarious for the last decade, and he is extremely sparing about his appearances.

Over a lifetime of attending concerts and opera performances it's inevitable that you tend to attach yourself to certain performers in whom you develop an enduring artistic trust. In my own case, some of those specially revered guides who are still before the public include Maurizio Pollini (whom I first heard in 1968), Plácido Domingo (1971), Colin Davis (1965) and Bernard Haitink (1968). These are all, for me, giants of the art. When they perform, I try to be there.

But Abbado has always had a special allure, especially in the opera house, where, in addition to Pelléas I have heard him direct unforgettable performances of Simon Boccanegra, Un Ballo in Maschera, Boris Godunov, Elektra and Le Nozze di Figaro. And allure is something that the soloist who played Prokofiev's third piano concerto under Abbado's baton in Leeds Town Hall back in November 1966 undoubtedly has too. Any concert that involves either Martha Argerich or Claudio Abbado performing separately these days is likely to be a five-star sell-out event. Forty-five years ago, I was lucky enough to see them both, in Leeds, as part of the regular winter concert season.



Martin Kettle's concert programme for Abbado's

Leeds Town Hall appearance in November 1966 Photograph: Martin Kettle

Abbado's first concert tour in this country was with the Hallé Orchestra, then still in its postwar pomp under John Barbiroli. After a date in Manchester, Abbado brought the Hallé to Leeds on Bonfire Night 1966 where they kicked off, improbably it now seems, with Bach's Suite no 3 in D. I wonder when the Hallé last played that piece? In the 1960s, though, you could still hear big-band Bach and there would have been few raised eyebrows at such programming. It's a reminder, nevertheless, that Abbado is not a stranger to the baroque. His recent recording of [the Brandenburgs](#) shows how much Abbado has imbibed from the early music performance revolution that was still just a gleam in [John Eliot Gardiner's](#) eye back in the 1960s. But it is worth remembering that Abbado and Bach also go back a long way together.

Then came the Prokofiev and Martha Argerich (or - as the Town Hall programme editors insisted on describing her back then - Matha Argerich). I can remember two particular things about that performance. The first was, let's not pretend, [Argerich's fantastic glamour](#). That hair! The second was the whirlwind light touch, the way that she could accelerate a phrase like lightning and then slow it just as fast, which may sound an odd thing to say, but she still does it to this day. It's a breathtaking technical skill. It's a trademark Argerich touch. And my ear caught it all those years ago.

Then, after the interval, Abbado conducted Brahms's first symphony. There are many composers for whose music one would turn first to Abbado's recordings. Mahler, Berg, Debussy - and on the other side of his brain - Verdi would all be high on my list. But Brahms would be the top of my Abbado picks, partly but not only because all those years ago he drove into the tragic grandeur of the first movement of the first symphony with a human warmth which very few other conductors have ever achieved. Abbado "gets" lots of music. But he gets Brahms's unique combination of formal traditionalism and lyrical experiment more than anyone I have ever heard. Perhaps, as with Toscanini before him, there is something lighter and less pompous that Italians bring to Brahms. But Abbado had it then, and he has had it in every Brahms performance I have been fortunate enough to hear him conduct since - a second symphony with the LSO in the 1980s, a third with the Berlin Philharmonic in Florence in the 1990s. For me it all started with that Brahms first, in Leeds long ago.

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