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At the Lucerne Easter Festival, Haitink Holds Up a Mirror for Promising Maestros

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Pedrazzetti/Lucerne Festival Bernard Haitink, right, offered instruction to Joseph Trafton, one of 19 conductors 32 and younger, who participated in the “master class” at the Lucerne Easter Festival over the weekend.

LUCERNE, Switzerland — Bernard Haitink and Brahms are big at the [Lucerne Festival](#) this year. Mr. Haitink conducted his [third and last Brahms program of the Easter Festival](#) with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe at the concert hall of the KKL (Kultur- und Kongresszentrum) on Wednesday evening, and the Brahms cycle concludes in August with [two concerts in the summer festival](#).

Wednesday’s program consisted of Brahms’s Second Symphony and Violin Concerto, with [Leonidas Kavakos](#) as soloist, and the performances were mostly excellent. Mr. Kavakos, well received, added an encore, the Allemanda from Ysaÿe’s Fourth Sonata for Solo Violin.

Then, on Thursday and Friday, Mr. Haitink took up more Brahms: the Fourth Symphony, as the main subject of [a weekend master class for young conductors](#) (32 and under). At least the festival calls it a master class; Mr. Haitink, 82 and seeming to become only more modest as his status as elder statesman grows, prefers the term “conductor days.”

Mr. Haitink, who took up residence here — in Kastanienbaum, actually, in the nearby hills overlooking Lake Lucerne — eight years ago, has held similar classes under the auspices of the Lucerne conservatory. This was the first time the festival presented the class, and with its added cachet, the number of applicants rose to 163, from 50 or so. Using DVDs submitted by the applicants, Mr. Haitink and a pair of advisers winnowed the field to 20.

On Thursday, after a defection because of illness, Mr. Haitink and his aides watched 19 entrants conduct two-piano reductions of parts of the Brahms Fourth (mostly) as well as Bruckner's Fourth Symphony and Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. The judges chose seven budding maestros to work with [the Festival Strings Lucerne](#), leaving the rest of the participants to audit, though some of those not chosen got chances to conduct as well.

Mr. Haitink asked one applicant who took part in a previous class why he had returned. The student said it was because he had learned so much the first time.

"Am I so talkative?," Mr. Haitink asked.

"No," the student replied, "but you say just the right things."

No one would accuse Mr. Haitink of talking too much. "I am allergic to talking conductors," he later told another student. Much of the art of conducting, like that of teaching, lies in saying just the right things. But more of it lies in body movement and eye contact.

The chosen seven began work on Friday with, yes, the Brahms. Mr. Haitink dispensed his wisdom almost apologetically yet bluntly, in small doses.

"You don't have a real pianissimo here," he told one student, "because you don't suggest a pianissimo. Try to be expressive when the music asks for it."

A real pianissimo, playing that is truly quiet (though not necessarily lacking in intensity), is among the hardest things for a conductor to achieve, Mr. Haitink noted later.

"I'm quite keen on pianissimos, finally, after 50 years," he said. "When orchestras do them, they are pleased at how good it sounds. But they will not do it by themselves, even the greatest orchestras. You have to ask them." But ask them in gestures, please, not in words.

Repeatedly, words failed Mr. Haitink. "I'm still not happy, and I don't know how to say it," he said. So he would take the baton and demonstrate a few minimal gestures that would totally transform the sound. Then he would hand the baton back to the awed student. "For heaven's sake," he told one, "please don't imitate me."

Far from desiring clones, Mr. Haitink repeatedly gloried in the fact that every student's work, even among the initial 19 participants, was different. In an interview later, he spoke of the difficulty of choosing finalists on the basis of DVDs or two-piano performances. He dislikes the process of elimination, insisting that "music is not a competition, not the Olympic Games."

"But I don't regret the people we have chosen," he said. "It is a mirror for me of the profession, if it is a profession."

And with utter humility, he held himself up as a mirror for the students.

"You come across as very shy, with the music inside you," he told one. "In this world of inflated egos, I would advise you to stay just the way you are."

He praised a young woman for not visibly reacting when a horn player entered a measure early. "When somebody has a black hole like that, if the conductor makes faces, it only gets

worse. And then it spreads.” (An excellent principal player in the Chamber Orchestra of Europe ran into a meteor shower of sorts in the Brahms Second on Wednesday evening; Mr. Haitink, showing no reaction, kept the problem from spreading.)

But the choicest bit of wisdom — and perhaps, in its backhanded way, the most heartening — came when Mr. Haitink asked a student why he had waited so long to apply a crescendo. “I’m just afraid it will build too early,” the student answered.

“Don’t be afraid,” Mr. Haitink said. “It won’t help.”