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A one-note epiphany on Mahler's First Symphony

Tom Service thought he knew Mahler's First – until he heard the great Claudio Abbado conduct it. He celebrates the most imaginative symphony ever written

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guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 19 August 2009 22.00 BST

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It is one of composer George Benjamin's favourite notes in the whole orchestral repertoire. At the Lucerne festival in Switzerland last week, he told me that a single tuba note in the first movement of Mahler's First Symphony is one of the great moments in any symphony, ever. A few nights later, conductor Claudio Abbado's Lucerne Festival Orchestra – an ensemble he hand-picks every summer – demonstrated just why this note matters, as well as why Mahler's First is one of the most radical and elemental experiences orchestral music has to offer. This was a piece I thought I knew, after decades of listening to it in recordings and concerts, and even abusing the cello part in a performance as a student. But Abbado's interpretation (and Benjamin's insight) turned it into an epiphany for me.

No symphony begins quite like Mahler's First. In Lucerne, it made a sound like the universe tuning up: the strings all played the same note of the scale, but spread over the entire range of the orchestra, from the bottom of the double basses to the stratospheric heights of the first violins. Mahler asks the orchestra to play incredibly quietly, and Abbado's players conjured a sound that shimmered with primordial possibility. Mahler then projects a handful of elemental musical building blocks on to this quiescent canvas: a lugubrious descending melody, distant brass fanfares, bird-calls in the woodwinds – as if trying out a cast of musical characters to develop in the rest of the symphony.

When the music comes down to earth, Mahler composes a gentle cello melody, which he says should be played "very sweetly". It's a melody that gives the music some real symphonic momentum; but just as soon as it has built up a head of steam, it collapses back into the cosmic calm of the opening bars. Which is where that mystical tuba comes in: while the rest of the orchestra were obsessed with the note A, tuba-player Thomas Keller played a different note, right down in the depths of his instrument: a faultlessly soft F that gently knocked the music into a different orbit, before propelling the movement to its orgiastic conclusion.

That first movement sets out the extremes of Mahler's musical universe, and I've never heard the final bars sound as joyful and earthy as they did in last weekend, or heard a pianissimo as concentrated as these players produced at the start. The rest of the symphony amplifies those expressive opposites: the "drunken, sexy" second movement (as one of the violin players described it to me); the surreal funeral march of the third, based on a minor-key version of Frère Jacques; and the gigantic finale. Mahler originally called this last movement "from hell", and it starts with an existential scream that subsides into a love song, before culminating in an overwhelming, massively noisy chorale.

Mahler's later symphonies are more complex, more ambiguous and much longer. But Abbado's performances last week made me see that the composer had found a unique transparency and clarity in the First. He created orchestral sounds in this score that no one had dared compose before, and which still sound new, 120 years after the symphony's premiere. This is all the more jaw-dropping when you realise Mahler wrote

the bulk of the piece in the late 1880s, before he was even 30.

Abbado, conducting without a baton, became a medium for Mahler's music, and there was a connection between his gestures – the arcs of his left hand, the intensity of his face – and his musicians that was magical to watch. (The orchestra has recorded DVDs of symphonies 2-7, and the First will follow.) But the real magic here was Mahler's. In the last moments of the symphony, the percussion section goes wild: in a few bars, all you hear is a white noise of timpani, bass drum, triangle and cymbal, before the orchestra crashes in with the final chords. In Abbado's performances, it was the completion of a symphonic creation myth of titanic power – and it made me rethink Mahler. The First Symphony was never one of my desert island discs; now it's essential – the most imaginative and modern first symphony ever written.

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