

The Telegraph

Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Festival Hall, review

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★★★★★



Claudio Abbado and Lucerne Festival Orchestra at the Festival Hall Photo: CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU



By [Ivan Hewett \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/ivanhewett/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/ivanhewett/)

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Simply watching the Lucerne Festival Orchestra in action brings a warm glow. It's a gathering of Europe's best orchestra section leaders with players from the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, so at each music stand one sees a seasoned and often appropriately grizzled older player next to a keen younger one. It's an affecting symbol of the baton being passed down from one generation to the next, something one rarely sees nowadays.

The credit for this unique vision belongs to Claudio Abbado, who formed the orchestra in 2003. At Monday's concert one could feel the special connection between the players and the smiling but now somewhat fragile-seeming conductor on the podium. He's a benign presence, who listens intently,

bringing out with mild gestures the innate musicality in his players rather than imposing a vision from above.

We heard the results in full splendour after the interval in Bruckner's 5th Symphony. Before that the small wiry figure of Mitsuko Uchida came on to the podium for Schumann's piano concerto. She pounced on the electrifying opening phrase, just as we knew she would, and moulded the intimate "dying away" phrases in a way which drew us in, as if for a moment we were hearing a little character piece in a living room. But the great thing about Uchida's performance was that it was muscular and assertive when it needed to be. Private and public were held in an ideal balance.

Uchida wasn't the only individual who shone in the concerto. Clarinettist Stefan Schilling's poignant, far-away dialogue with her in the first movement was a treasurable moment.

In the Bruckner symphony, with the orchestra let off the leash, one became aware of more star quality among those young and old faces. Flautist Jacques Zoon came close to the ideal Bruckner clearly had in mind, of a flautist who never has to breathe. The four horn players made a fabulous golden sound, which seemed to come from afar.

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All this local colour helped to animate the symphony, which is one of Bruckner's toughest nuts. It's an immense, craggy thing, full of rough, unpolished edges, with here and there a heart-stoppingly beautiful moment. Not a piece to suit Abbado, you might think, who is renowned for bringing a perfect finish to his performances.

In fact he clearly relished the music's awkward visionary quality, and led a performance which was thrilling, vivid, and absolutely true to its spirit.

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