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Simón Bolívar Orchestra/Abbado/ Dudamel at the Lucerne Easter Festival

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Chalk met cheese in Lucerne last weekend. The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra is now, of course, a regular excitement on the great stages of the world: its exuberance, virtuosity, vast size and heartening back-story — of beauty created out of slum poverty — charming ecstatic acclaim out of the stuffiest audiences. But hitherto it has generally been conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, the 29-year-old whizzkid who is himself the most prominent product of *El Sistema* in Venezuela.

On Friday, however, Dudamel sat in the audience while his compatriots were conducted by the 76-year-old Claudio Abbado, the epitome of Old European sophistication and subtlety. It was a fascinating clash, almost of civilisations, certainly of aesthetic philosophies. Even the chosen programme seemed like a negotiation: Abbado perhaps championing Prokofiev's febrile but esoteric *Scythian Suite* and the densely knotted Symphonic Pieces from Berg's *Lulu* (where his latest protégée, Anna Prohaska, was the feisty soprano soloist); but agreeing to Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony* as an outlet for the orchestra's massive collective emotions.

The results, however, were enthralling — and, one suspects, not much like what Abbado would have achieved in this repertoire with his own super-refined Lucerne Festival Orchestra. I found the intensity of the Tchaikovsky overwhelming, especially in the outer movements (the inner ones were a bit stodgy). Abbado conveyed not just the music's morbid downward pull, but also the sense that life itself begins and ends in silence. The orchestra, for its part, supplied some stunning solo playing (its first clarinet and horn could shine in any circles), an animalistic energy and, at the end, a wonderfully thick sonority in the lower strings. Of course it helps to have 13 double basses, throbbing into a sepulchral oblivion.

The next night Dudamel was back with a programme — Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini* and Strauss's *Alpine Symphony* — chosen, it seemed, to show him at his flashiest and his band at its noisiest. Again there was much thrillingly turbo-charged playing. But, to the audience's disappointment, no encores: no sambas or twirling instruments or waving flags.

The truth is that this is no longer a youth orchestra, except in name. Many players are in their late twenties, and perhaps want to put those gimmicky encores behind them. All of which raises a host of questions. I wouldn't say that the phenomenal Bolívar bandwagon is running out of steam. But will we still need them, will we still feed them, when they're 34?

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