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COE / Haitink at Konzerthaus, Lucerne

Hilary Finch



As an 80th birthday treat, Bernard Haitink has chosen to make the celebratory grand finale of his now completed Beethoven cycle with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe at the Lucerne Easter Festival. He ended with the first and with the last, in a starrily cast and truly festive performance of the Ninth Symphony.

Haitink remained seated on the podium throughout. A back injury that was clearly causing him considerable pain seemed to have the effect of redoubling his players' energy and will. And the clarity, achieved by minimum vibrato and translucent textures in the slow movement, created real momentum for the finale.

Schiller's great *Ode to Joy* was approached more with robust reason than with rhetoric: the cellos and basses declaimed their message with firm determination, and Gerald Finley exhorted his friends to joy with the gentle wisdom of a mentor. The Australian tenor Steve Davislum inspired the tenors of the excellent Swiss Chamber Choir to sing with a ringing muscularity seldom heard among their English counterparts. And the partnership of Sally Matthews and Christianne Stotijn was refreshingly and exuberantly effortless.

Before the interval the First Symphony had been shaped by the wit and sense of tingling unpredictability that also characterised Haitink's way with the Eighth earlier in the week. Here he conjured a sense of mischievous serendipity from the music, bringing forward the voices of the horns and clarinets in the Konzerthaus's luminous acoustics.

Best of all, though, was Maria João Pires's central performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 2. Pires makes everything she plays entirely her own. In her intensely imaginative and keen-eared playing, the first-movement cadenza seemed a voyage of discovery. Furthermore, her fascination with Beethoven's experiments with sonority in the slow movement made it seem as though the music were composing itself afresh all over again.

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