

Lucerne festival; BBC Prom 44

Switzerland; Royal Albert Hall, London



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Claudio Abbado

conducting in Lucerne last week. Photograph by Georg Anderhub
Fringed by dozens of tiny flickering night-lights, the stage of Lucerne's sleek white lakeside concert hall was transformed last weekend into a grey, shambolic dungeon for a semi-staging of *Fidelio*, conducted by [Claudio Abbado](#) with his elite Lucerne Festival Orchestra and a dream line-up of soloists led by Nina Stemme and that most serious of star tenors, Jonas Kaufmann.

Beethoven's opera about political freedom and conjugal love was the opening event of the five-week **Lucerne festival**, given in two performances. I heard the second. The less said about Tatjana Gürbaca's hastily assembled staging, in which prison shirts covered the area behind the orchestra in pale imitation of Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag*, and the performers came and went without logic, the better. The make-believe candles, twinkling at the string players' feet and behind the conductor's podium, were the best bit.

All that mattered was the music, and the miracles achieved by Abbado, 77, his frail health making each public appearance more precious. A decade ago, after enduring a medical catastrophe, it seemed unlikely that he would ever step on a concert platform again. Now, tanned and wiry, if gracile, with his physician comfortingly nearby in the stalls, he wastes no energy on extravagant gesture. Not that he was ever a thrasher or wagglar in the way of some. He barely leans forward to command his players, instead quietly beckoning to an instrument, or exerting the smallest pressure, like gentle kneading, to express a forte or an accented note. His entire repertoire of movements could be contained within an outstretched pair of arms.

With this particular orchestra, he scarcely needs to steer or urge, only to ignite. Founded by Abbado and the festival's director, Michael Haefliger, and now in its eighth season, the Lucerne Festival Orchestra comprises the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and a glitter of top soloists, chamber and world-class orchestral musicians who give up their summer break for the pleasure of working with Abbado. The results scorch the ears.

The fraught history of Beethoven's only opera, a discussion for another place, has left myriad questions open, starting with the choice of overture. Abbado opted for the short, ebullient one named "Fidelio", the rallying opening statement punched out with verve and zestful authority. It set a faster pace than materialised in the broad tempo of the rest of the performance, with the great Act I quartet deliberately unhurried. This exposed some vocal dryness in Marzelline (Rachel Harnisch), but allowed the masterly violas and cellos time to glory, without indulgence, in the introductory bars.

The Swedish soprano Nina Stemme, whose Isolde has thrilled British audiences at Glyndebourne and Covent Garden, made her debut in the title role, her voice potent and lustrous as ever. It's a pity she doesn't yet feel confident without a score, copies of which had to be hidden on lecterns none too effectively draped with jailbird rags and used by all the cast except Kaufmann. Stemme will know it by the time she sings the role in London next spring.

Kaufmann's Act 2 opening utterance, from the depths of Pizarro's dungeon, was extraordinary: a black, guttural groan which grew into pure fortissimo gold. He moved through his aria, from despair, to imagined joy, to grief once more, with absolute control and emotional conviction. This German repertoire, which features on his disc of arias conducted by Abbado, is his natural aesthetic terrain. But how had no one noticed that his luxury Swiss watch (as advertised in full-page splendour in the programme) would sparkle and dazzle under the stage lights?

This faux pas nearly ruined the moment of marital reunion, as if Leonora had found not her half-starved, near-dead incarcerated husband but the Holy Grail itself – not inappropriate, perhaps, since Kaufmann had made a quick dash to Lucerne from Bayreuth, where he is singing Wagner's Arthurian swan-knight, Lohengrin, who wears pretty much the same casual shirt and trousers as Florestan here, but nothing so swanky as a wristwatch.

Gürbaca's reworking of the spoken text fared little better than her woeful staging. But the musicians worked ferociously to compensate, as a forthcoming Decca recording should confirm. The biggest cheers were for Abbado. A gaggle of Abbadianis – signed up members of Claudio's fan club – were out in force, stoning their hero in the nicest possible way with flowers tossed like a burst of coloured meteorites from high balconies.

The following night another musician on leave from Bayreuth's *Lohengrin* arrived: Andris Nelsons. Maybe permission, usually reluctantly given, was granted on grounds of relevance. Wagner spent the night in a pub in Lucerne the very night *Lohengrin* had its world premiere in Germany. Anyway, nothing would have kept the young Latvian conductor away. He triumphed with his City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra at last's year festival and was immediately invited back, with a CBSO residency now booked for 2012.

They gave the Swiss premiere of an extrovert, noisy percussion concerto, *Frozen in Time*, by the Israeli composer Avner Dorman (b. 1975), with Martin Grubinger, Austria's answer to Evelyn Glennie but with shoes on, as virtuosic, athletic soloist. The title refers to land masses, geological phenomena and "the era of globalisation". You get the drift. Cow bells, gamelan and jazzy grooves conjoined Europe, Africa, the Americas, Asia and grunge rock. It had none of the bristling ingenuity of Michael Jarrell's unfinished *La Chambre aux échos*, premiered by the resident Ensemble intercontemporain and conductor Susanna Mälkki. But there's no point huffing. Dorman's piece is a playful, acrobatic concert showpiece, not a place to find grit.

That came in the main work, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 6, "Pathétique", written just before his death in 1893. Conducting without a score, Nelsons conjured a performance rich in explosive climaxes, urgent, windswept tempi and gusts of tragic desolation. Tuning was at times slightly awry, and the coruscating excitement of the third-movement march, with its screaming brass and manic energy, made it hard to muster quite enough intensity for the valedictory adagio finale. But these are refinements. The CBSO, who the previous week gave a performance to 9,000 people in Berlin's 1931 Waldbühne stadium is buoyed up by its relationship with Nelsons and riding high.

There was more Tchaikovsky at Wednesday's **Prom** from the Russian National Orchestra after a 14-year absence. The ensemble's founder, Mikhail Pletnev, cancelled and his late replacement as conductor was Andrey Boreyko. For whatever reasons, the genial Suite No 3 sounded smudgy and unkempt despite a resplendent polacca finale. The surprise came in Rachmaninov's Paganini Rhapsody. Instead of sounding splashy and lush, the Russians and the brilliant solo pianist Nikolai Lugansky gave a crisp, transparent reading glinting with wit. Only later did I discover where it was written: in Rachmaninov's villa on the shores of, you guessed it, Lake Lucerne.

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