



Claudio Abbado conducts Schubert, Beethoven & Wagner

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No doubt the record industry will issue any number of commemorative editions in memory of the late Claudio Abbado (1933-2014) over the coming months. This disc of Lucerne Festival performances was already in the pipeline, I believe, so Audite have been able to issue this tribute very promptly and it is a fitting one.

We learn from Peter Haggmann's very good booklet tribute that Abbado made his Lucerne Festival debut back in 1966: at that time he was so unknown that, as Haggmann relates, when he arrived to take his first rehearsal there the doorman didn't know who he was and nearly didn't admit him. Over the following years the Italian maestro became ever more closely linked with the Festival, appearing there many times and eventually emulating Toscanini by assembling a hand-picked orchestra to make music with him there. The combination of Abbado and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra was to be a potent one. Here, however, we find him with two other orchestras with whom he enjoyed long and close relationships.

The Schubert performance comes from Abbado's fourth appearance at the Festival. Peter Haggmann suggests that the VPO 'appears to set the tone', arguing that Abbado came to view Schubert in a different, leaner light only some years later. The present performance seems pretty traditional and mellow both in terms of sound and conception. The first movement is steady and expressive. The main theme is delivered expansively and warmly yet as the movement unfolds there's drama too. All in all, this is a very romantic approach. The exposition repeat is not taken. The second movement is leisurely and lyrical. The string sound is rich and full while the solo woodwind contributions are distinctive and distinguished - sample the refined, gently eloquent clarinet solo that begins at 2:28. In recent years we've become accustomed to hearing more bracing approaches to Schubert from a variety of conductors but this more traditional performance offers a great deal and I found it rewarding and enjoyable.

Ten years separate the Schubert from the other two performances, both of which were given at a concert that marked, fifty years to the day, the occasion when in 1938 Arturo Toscanini inaugurated the Lucerne Festival; it's not completely clear from the notes but I infer that Abbado replicated Toscanini's programme. On this occasion Abbado was at the helm of an orchestra that was very different from the VPO: the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, which had grown out of the European Community Youth Orchestra, one of the orchestras that Abbado founded during his career.

With this leaner and smaller ensemble at Abbado's disposal we are in a very different world to that of the opulent VPO. The orchestral sound is lithe and bright and I think the timpanist uses hard sticks. The Beethoven symphony performance is excellent.

After a purposeful introduction the first movement's Allegro con brio is very lively and energetic. By comparison with the VPO the sound is light and as lean as a whippet. I do not say that to denigrate the VPO in any way but merely to stress the contrast between two very different ensembles with vastly different performing styles. The second movement is beautifully shaped; the music sounds relaxed and completely at ease. Here, as well as admiring the delicate COE strings we can savour the gently glowing tones of the woodwinds and horns. The scherzo features explosive accents and razor-sharp playing and that's even more true of the finale in which Beethoven's witty and high-spirited writing is splendidly performed.

Arguably, the finest performance on the disc is that of the Siegfried Idyll. This performance is tender and intimate, the textures wonderfully transparent. It's expertly shaped, supple and beautifully played. Though the music is kept light and fluent the moments of ardour and celebration are perfectly achieved. This is a highly refined performance yet it all seems so natural.

This is an excellent souvenir of just a small part of Claudio Abbado's work at Lucerne. As I hope I've made clear, all three performances are first rate and well worth adding to any collection. As usual, Audite's production values are very high. The booklet is very good, containing a well-written appreciation of the conductor's association with the Lucerne Festival and there are a good number of black and white photographs. Most important of all, the sound is very good. The original Swiss radio broadcast tapes have been used and Ludger Böckenhoff, who has undertaken the re-mastering has achieved excellent results. The audiences are commendably silent and there is no applause after the performances.

This is a highly desirable archive issue and I hope Audite may be able to source some more Abbado performances as part of their very valuable Lucerne Festival series.