



Claudio Abbado conducts Schubert, Beethoven & Wagner

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All these performances are from the Lucerne Festival in the years before Claudio Abbado formed his hand-picked Lucerne Festival Orchestra in 2003. According to Michael Haefliger, the head of the Festival, Abbado approved their addition to the Lucerne Festival Historical Performances.

Annotator Peter Hagmann describes this performance of Franz Schubert's Unfinished Symphony as traditional. I have read reviews that agree, adding that Abbado's recent Schubert is more modern, leaner in texture, and controversial. I haven't kept up with Schubert recordings in recent years, so I'm in no position to argue. That said, I don't recall hearing many performances quite like this one from around 1978, especially the first movement, which is dramatic, dark, and even stormy in places. The tempo is a good deal slower than its marking, particularly in transitions, though it maintains its motion. The quieter passages are quiet and mysterious, perhaps even worrying. The Andante is not as relatively slow or as mysterious as I, but it is more serene and mostly at peace. Not all is forgotten, though, as the firm sterner intervals remind us. Quite interesting is how some of the quiet moments, particularly near the end, anticipate the performance of Wagner's Siegfried Idyll from ten years later that is on this disc. The Vienna Philharmonic is the perfect orchestra for this kind of Schubert.

The Siegfried Idyll from 1988 is gentle and childlike with atmosphere that is luminous and touching. It is well known that Debussy was influenced by Wagner, but it would be easy to imagine that the influence ran in both directions from listening to this.

While the Schubert is the most interesting performance on this program, the Wagner is probably the best, mainly because it has a luminosity I've not heard elsewhere in this work. Even so, for a performance by a small orchestra, I'm drawn more to the one Solti led many years ago with the Vienna Philharmonic on Decca. That one is more closely recorded, more imaginative in phrasing, and more vital overall.

The Beethoven comes from the same concert as the Wagner. Again, the performance is small in scale, with technique that is taut and deft. One major difference between the playing here and in the Schubert is that where the Viennese dig into the music, the COE tends to sail over the notes more, and their energy is linear. They do this with great dexterity, but they also create a sameness that carries through all the movements. I is straightforward as well as cleanly delineated and structured. The Larghetto is just as straightforward with a touch of affection. The last two movements are similar and just as deftly played. The Chamber Orchestra of Europe produces a good-sized sound for a smaller orchestra, but I still miss the plushness a larger ensemble can produce in this music.

The sound is very good. The interesting notes are concerned mainly with Abbado and his relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic and his history with the Lucerne Festival.