



Claudio Abbado conducts Schubert, Beethoven & Wagner

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These superb live performances further document the near half-century-long association of the Lucerne Festival and the late Claudio Abbado, who conducts two stellar orchestras with which he frequently collaborated. There are some 28 recordings of the Schubert 'Unfinished' Symphony by the Vienna Philharmonic available. However, as far as I've been able to determine, this is the only time the VPO recorded the piece under Abbado. His complete Schubert Symphony cycle was a collaboration with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the group he helped found and which he conducts here in the Beethoven Second Symphony and Siegfried Idyll. This is the fifth recording in a series called 'Lucerne Festival Historic Performances' that presents remastered recordings originally made for broadcast by SWR, Swiss Radio and Television. The Vienna Philharmonic Schubert was recorded in September 1978 and the COE Beethoven and Wagner in August 1988. Despite the performances' vintage, the recorded sound will probably satisfy discriminating listeners.

As unlikely as it might seem to describe any interpretation of the 'Unfinished' as startlingly original, that is the inescapable impression left by this performance. The gripping intensity of the first movement is tempered by a lithe grace. Divested of weighty stolidity, the music gains credibility as the creation of a young man portraying an epic confrontation. Schubert's dissonances, often lost in the fulsome thickness of string sound, here emerge as sharp and painful. If there is anything to be regretted, it is that the exposition was not repeated. The Andante is often interpreted as an antidote to the scathing conflicts and tensions unearthed in the first movement. Not so here. The dramatic impetus of the Allegro moderato, in some ineffably sublimated form, is extended, telescoped, even compounded into the farthest reaches of the slow movement, which seems to speak of cosmic loneliness. Meanwhile, it is blessed by the Vienna winds, for theirs is the sound most nearly approaching perfection. This performance alone is easily worth the price of the disc.

In the wake of the tragically inflected 'Unfinished', the robust and buoyant D major Beethoven of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe comes as a shift to sunny skies and sweet breezes. After the ample, spacious introduction, the Allegro con brio fairly bristles with energy, each perfectly calculated sforzando contributing to a palpable joy in unified precision of execution. Bucolic vistas and subtle intrigues in the Larghetto are described with refined brushwork, using a delicately blended palette. A scherzo more witty than raucous provides the swift transition to the finale, lithe, athletic and brimming with detail, that is the summation and fulfilment of all that has gone before. This performance could serve as a paradigm of the symphonic ideal, bequeathed by Haydn and Mozart, to be exalted by Beethoven.

This Siegfried Idyll is a Wagnerian canvas with the varnish of pretence and excess

painstakingly removed. What remains is unalloyed ardour, simply expressed with disarming directness. This interpretation combines dappled colours with a round, gentle ripeness that is likely to render all but a handful of others drab by comparison.

