

Lucerne is a classical festival of the first water

By Jessica Duchen

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Music to the eyes:
The spectacular KKL Luzern, venue for the Lucerne Festival

If you stand on Lucerne's covered bridge, blinking out at the ultimate in lake-and-mountains landscape, you're in good company. This rarified corner of Switzerland has long been a magnet for musical greats. Richard Wagner lived for six years at Tribschen, a gentle lakeside stroll away, where his house is now a museum. Later, in the 1930s, Sergei Rachmaninov, too, settled near Lake Lucerne.

But it was 1938 before the town's music festival was born. After both Germany and Austria fell under Nazi rule, a host of great musicians who were either banned from the Bayreuth and Salzburg festivals or refused to perform there decamped to Lucerne to let music flourish in freedom. That summer, Arturo Toscanini was the first to conduct in the gardens opposite Tribschen. Today, Lucerne's state-of-the-art lakeside concert hall, the KKL Luzern, enhances the festival's position as one of Europe's top destinations for classical music.

Now, as it always has, the festival hosts an enviable array of stars: guests this year include the pianist Maurizio Pollini, Daniel Barenboim with his West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and Pierre Boulez giving conducting masterclasses.

But the festival has its own orchestra, too. The Lucerne Festival Orchestra assembles around the revered conductor Claudio Abbado, drawing its players from the orchestras to which he is closest, notably the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic.

Witnessing them in the festival's opening programme – Brahms's Piano Concerto No 1, the Prelude to Lohengrin by Wagner, and the Adagio of Mahler's Symphony No 10 – there was no mistaking the passion with which the musicians deliver the slender Abbado's considered interpretations, the phrasing focusing on the musical connections within the score, the attention to detail meticulous and the beauty of tone irresistible. This concert was all about the remarkable chemistry between Abbado and his players.

And where else would you find a pianist of the grand-master stature of Radu Lupu appearing as a stand-in? The elusive Romanian soloist replaced Hélène Grimaud at a few weeks' notice. During the concerto he and the orchestra regrettably parted company at times, but he deserved a large box of Switzerland's best chocolate for continuing with his rapt and tender Brahms encore (the A major Intermezzo) regardless of two intrusions from a particularly vile ringtone.

Lucerne Festival, Switzerland (www.lucernefestival.ch) to 18 September