

For a Festival, Change Comes, Invited or Not

In Lucerne, Andris Nelsons Is a Rising Star

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Critic's Notebook

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The rising conductor Andris Nelsons. Peter Fischli/Lucerne Festival

LUCERNE, Switzerland — The [Lucerne Festival](#), set in motion in 1938 by Arturo Toscanini, is one of Europe's most venerable. Now, during [Michael Haefliger](#)'s term as executive and artistic director, change has become a way of life at the festival, which opened here on Friday.

The change has mostly been a matter of choice. In 2003, to name two shining examples, Mr. Haefliger, whose term started in 1999 and has just been extended through 2020, established both the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, conducted by Claudio Abbado, and the Lucerne Festival Academy, directed by the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez.

But change has also impinged unbidden, notably this summer, with the absences of Mr. Abbado, who died at [80 in January](#), and Mr. Boulez, who at 89 is recovering from a broken shoulder.

For Mr. Abbado, a revered figure in Lucerne, a suitable replacement was already at hand: the fast-rising Latvian [Andris Nelsons](#), 35, who conducted a memorial concert for Mr. Abbado at the Lucerne Easter Festival in April and has taken over his two orchestral programs this summer, both devoted to Brahms. So suitable and so ready, in fact, that it is widely assumed that Mr. Nelsons, who has been the music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra since 2008 and becomes music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra next month, will soon succeed Mr. Abbado as conductor of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. Europeans are already speculating when he might take over the Berlin Philharmonic. Nothing has been officially announced.



An ensemble performing during the Lucerne Festival. A work drawing on the practice of sitting shiva was part of the program. Georg Anderhub/Lucerne Festival

On Friday evening Mr. Nelsons conducted the festival orchestra at the KKL Concert Hall in the first of his Brahms programs, an unusual one. In addition to the Second Symphony, the concert included the Alto Rhapsody, which calls for a male chorus (here members of the Bavarian Radio Choir) for just a

few moments of its 15-minute length, and the Second Serenade, which dispenses with the entire violin section on hand for the other works. Brahms repeatedly calls for moderation in these works — Allegro moderato, Adagio non troppo (twice), Allegro non troppo, Presto ma non assai — and Mr. Nelsons gave him that. The opening of the serenade was slow, even laid back, and the work as a whole seemed to lack energy until the sprightly finale.

Then again, maybe it was just tentativeness. Mr. Nelsons, who evidently does not intimidate easily, might have been slightly in awe of the occasion, picking up the Abbado mantle at least for the moment.

At that, Mr. Nelsons gave the Alto Rhapsody a splendid performance on Friday, sensitive and beautifully balanced (no mean feat), and the Second Symphony was basically fine, with an energy in the rollicking finale that at least one listener had been missing. Sara Mingardo gave an excellent account of Goethe's text in the rhapsody, with a real contralto quality to her voice where mezzo-sopranos usually tread.

If all that Brahms (with another program to come on Friday) suggested a certain stodginess in the festival's programming this year, two concerts on Saturday quickly proved otherwise.

In the afternoon, at Südpol, a theater of the Lucerne Music School, Raphael Immoos conducted the "territorial premiere" of the Swiss composer [Mela Meierhans's](#) "Shiva for Anne," the final installment of her "Afterlife Trilogy." This new work draws on the Jewish practice of sitting shiva, in which the family of the deceased welcomes friends into its midst to share memories and tributes; the earlier ones — "Tante Hänsi," 2006; "Rithaa," 2010 — drew on Christian and Islamic traditions of mourning.

This project became intensely personal for Ms. Meierhans when her friend the English poet Anne Blonstein, who was to have written the libretto, died in 2011. That the work carries a tremendous freight of emotion is obvious,

but it communicates those feelings obliquely, both the music and the text seeming largely abstract.

The performance, by eight vocalists and percussionists from the Basler Madrigalisten and the Ensemble Dialogue, was little short of sensational, given the difficulties of the music, rife with close harmonies and dissonances that often required the singers to take their pitches from tuning forks at the ready. But as shivas go, this one was not particularly welcoming to outsiders.

A late-night concert on Saturday proved a tour de force for the Canadian soprano [Barbara Hannigan](#), who is taking up a second career as a conductor. Singing maestros are a rarity. The tenor Plácido Domingo conducts some, as did the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau late in his career, both typically sticking to either conducting or singing.

But Ms. Hannigan is intent on combining the two, as she did here with the [Mahler Chamber Orchestra](#), which forms the basis of the festival orchestra, in the KKL. She conducted orchestral works by Rossini, Fauré and Ligeti fluidly and more than capably. She sang three Mozart arias beautifully, facing the audience and using slightly exaggerated expressive gestures to cue the players, but she also knew when to leave well enough alone or to the concertmaster.

She inevitably made her biggest splash with her calling card, “Mysteries of the Macabre,” three arias from Ligeti’s zany opera “Le Grand Macabre,” sung in kinky black leather or a semblance thereof. (New Yorkers may recall Ms. Hannigan’s brilliant performance in the opera with Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic in 2010.) Here, in character (the head of the secret police), Ms. Hannigan’s conductorial gestures became more assertive and aggressive.

The conductor Simon Rattle, in town for work with the academy and Ms. Hannigan, made a brief cameo appearance, stalking down the aisle to take the stage and interrupt the performance with the immortal spoken line “What the hell is going on here?” It was all in good fun, as was Ms. Hannigan’s performance, though no one tried to answer that question.

How far will — or can — Ms. Hannigan take this new venture as she maintains a busy singing career? To opera? To Mahler symphonies?

That remains to be seen. But to the extent that sheer musicality and personality can do the trick, she seems to have it all, and you probably wouldn’t be wise to bet against her.

The Lucerne Festival runs through Sept. 14; www.lucernefestival.ch.

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