

ALFRED BRENDEL

PIANIST

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CLASSICAL REVIEW

Abbado elicits bold, bracing performances from the CSO

By **John von Rhein**, Tribune music critic

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Roberto Abbado isn't exactly the first name that springs to mind when considering conductors to become music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. But the splendid results he elicited from our orchestra Thursday night at Symphony Center suggested that he deserves, at the very least, a regular berth on the guest roster.

The gifted Italian conductor evinced much of the musical integrity and self-effacing command that typify performances by his famous uncle, Claudio Abbado. Yet he is very much his own man. His beat is clear and precise, his gestures are purposeful and his keen ear misses nothing. The man is all music, with one of the most expressive left arms in the business.

Throughout Abbado's bold and bracing account of Haydn's Symphony No. 93, one heard intimations of the explosive vitality packed into the Beethoven Fifth Symphony, with which it shared Thursday's concert.

In the Haydn symphony, he had a chamber version of the CSO functioning with one musical mind. Violins divided across the podium conversed in crisp articulation. Woodwinds stood out in startling relief against the reduced strings. The Menuetto was more a bunch of peasants dancing a laendler than a powdered-wig minuet. Haydnesque whimsy took front and center stage.

Beethoven's Fifth may be the most popular symphony ever written, and that's the problem: It is so familiar that it is almost impossible to hear with unjaded ears.

Abbado, however, found ways to make a fresh experience of it, not by distorting or imposing anything, but by returning to the basic DNA of the music - its restless rhythmic dynamism and inexorable drive. The four movements maintained their intensity in a seamless arc, gathering propulsive force through accumulation of detail and depth and quality of sound. Eugene Izotov delivered the eloquent oboe solo.

Between Haydn and Beethoven, the audience heard an 18th Century Viennese master performed by a latter-day Viennese master - Mozart's sunny Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major (K. 453), with Alfred Brendel delivering a typically lucid and penetrating account of the solo.

Beneath the pianist's bemused, Oxford-don exterior lies an opera singer just itching to emerge. Sometimes, the pianist took the metaphor literally, humming along with himself in sotto-voce grunts. His shaping of lines was both ruminative and spontaneous, as airy as the burgeoning figurations required, yet with a vein of ennobled pathos in the solemn Andante.

With Abbado and the orchestra at their most engaged, this made a satisfying centerpiece to a most enjoyable concert.

If there's any justice, the CSO won't keep us waiting another four years to experience what Abbado has to give us musically.

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