

Claudio Abbado and Simon Rattle: a tale of two conductors

After a performance in Berlin just 10 days ago, Abbado has cancelled his return to La Scala. Meanwhile, Rattle's astonishing St Matthew Passion is online



Blazing batons ... Claudio Abbado and Simon Rattle. Photographs: Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters

Couple of quick aftershocks and afterthoughts from Berlin: news that Claudio Abbado has cancelled his long-planned return to La Scala because of exhaustion is naturally concerning. Abbado was due to conduct Mahler's Second

Symphony with the La Scala Orchestra and Orchestra Mozart in Milan next week, the first time he would have been back at his hometown's opera house since leaving La Scala's top job in 1986. Reports from the New York Times, and from insiders I've spoken to, suggest this is a recuperative rest rather than anything more serious, in the wake of his battle with stomach cancer a few years ago.

Abbado must be distressed to hear that Milan's plans to plant 90,000 trees in the city (his condition for accepting the gig, as he told me with such excitement last year) have been cancelled, even after he received personal assurances from Milan's mayor Letizia Moratti. It must feel like a betrayal. In any case, here's hoping Abbado's energies return by the summer, and with them the performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Mahler's Ninth Symphony he will lead at the Lucerne festival.

Just 10 days ago, Abbado was at the Philharmonie in Berlin for his annual programme with his former orchestra. Available on the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall, he conducts Schubert, Brahms and Schoenberg – yours for 9.90 euros. That's tonight's entertainment for me sorted. And if you've a spare three and a half hours, watch Simon Rattle's *St Matthew Passion* from the Philharmonie in April, with "ritualisation" by theatre director Peter Sellars, also on the Digital Concert Hall. One of the Berlin Philharmonic's principal flautists, Emanuel Pahud, told Rattle that the experience was so powerful "it makes everything else we do seem secondary". I challenge you not to be an emotional wreck by the end of it: the singers, especially Mark Padmore as the Evangelist, give the performance of their lives; Sellars sensitively connects the Passion story with the performers and the audience, without distorting Bach's drama; and Rattle and his players are collectively raised to spooky, spiritual levels of inspiration. "The single most important thing we ever did here", is Rattle's own assessment – and it's hard not to agree with him.