

# Haitink's mellow mastery with CSO makes years seem to slip away

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John von Rhein [Contact Reporter](#)

The miracle of Bernard Haitink is that, as the eminent Dutch conductor advances in age, his conducting appears to become younger.

So it was on Thursday night at Symphony Center, where the former principal conductor of the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) returned to the CSO subscription series to lead works by a composer long associated with him, Richard Strauss, and another composer, Mozart, whose name is not often linked with his but whose music he also approaches with great sympathy.

Haitink, who turned 87 in March, exudes precisely the sort of unforced command and mellow authority needed to make a convincing statement of Strauss' "An Alpine Symphony," and he did so eloquently Thursday.

The German composer's hourlong depiction of a day's trek up and down a Bavarian mountain is the last word in late-Romantic gigantism, scored for an enormous orchestra including augmented onstage and offstage brass, cowbells, wind machine, thunder machine and organ. For too long Strauss' final symphonic poem was derided as being inferior to its predecessors, but, over the years, more frequent performances under discerning conductors have shown us there is much more to the "Alpine Symphony" than proto-Hollywood bombast and splashy sonic effects.

Haitink is one of those conductors. His achievement was to reveal the work in its full symphonic dimensions, making clear his belief in the merits of a piece Strauss himself greatly esteemed. Physical excitement and atmosphere were present but they never took precedence over grandeur and nobility of musical argument. Rarely has Strauss' symphonic thinking been realized with this degree of insight and feeling.

No need to gild the rhetorical lily, Haitink seemed to be telling us, since Strauss already took care of that. And in the Chicago Symphony he had a magnificent instrument to elucidate Strauss' beyond-opulent orchestration. Tempos moved and expanded naturally, and the balance of orchestral choirs was ideal. Haitink's control of the pages evoking the "Calm Before the Storm" was masterly. The storm itself, which I normally find the least interesting section, was gripping in sheerly musical terms.

The sound stage abounds in chirpy flutes, horns and clarinets calling across Alpine meadows, and in numerous other pictorial pages that the CSO musicians realized beautifully, whether collectively or individually. Michael Henschel's evocative oboe solo in "On the Summit" was one of several exceptional moments. Haitink gave each solo player a well-deserved bow and the audience was clamorous in its applause.

The accompaniment Haitink and the orchestra provided for pianist Till Fellner's crisp and stylish account of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 in E flat (K.482) was a study in proportion and characterful detail as well, attentive to the soloist's singing grace while never getting in the way of what he had to say — which was a great deal, as it turned out.

Fellner is one of today's very finest Mozart interpreters, for reasons that relate not only to his Austrian birth and Viennese training (Alfred Brendel was one of his teachers). His musicality is such that everything sounded as it should: sparkling runs, purling tone, diamond-edged articulation, clarity of voicing. Above all, he brought to this marvel of a concerto an expressive understanding that ran deep below the music's pristine surfaces, most notably in the introspective slow movement.

*The program will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$34-\$221; 312-294-3000, [www.cso.org](http://www.cso.org)*

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