

November 2009

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Our pick of the new releases



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### CONCERTS

## VERBIER, SWITZERLAND

**Jessica Duchon** reports from this year's gathering of the stars at the Swiss mountain resort

BEYOND THE GLITZY SIDE of the Verbier Festival, its mountain setting and megastar evenings, surprises are in store. The events I attended were not always the most high-profile, but they were universally fresh, invigorating and unexpected.

The youngest, newest players made some of the strongest impressions – especially the Argentinian cellist **Sol Gabetta**. Her morning recital with pianist Alessio Bax and composer-pianist Rodion Shchedrin (27 July) revealed her peerless technique and rich imagination. *Gramata cellam* for solo cello by Pēteris Vasks was a breathtaking opener, conjuring haunting, bizarre sounds from the instrument, whispering from another plane of existence. Shchedrin's *Ancient Melodies of Russian Folk Songs*, accompanied by the composer, sounded relatively conservative – deconstructed snippets suggestive of a vanished world viewed from the concrete monoliths of the USSR. And in the Rachmaninoff Sonata, Gabetta's big, silky tone shone out across a veritable piano concerto from Bax.

Another Russian-born composer was featured the following morning (28 July): Lera Auerbach, who is now based in New York. Her portrait concert spotlighted her Violin Sonata no.3, in which she herself partnered **Julian Rachlin**. Dealing with our thorny relationship with the passage of time, the work is in two Baroque-like pairs of slow then fast movements, the latter letting rip and sounding like crazed commuters running for some demonic train. It mingles a strong contemporary personality with roots planted firmly in the past; the clarity of Auerbach's writing and the familiarity of those references, evoking Bach, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, make her work distinctive yet accessible. Rachlin proved a stalwart festival trooper, ready to turn his hand to anything at short notice (including this). His strength, good humour and lively, persuasive tone pulled their weight at every turn.

That night's 'Rencontres inédites' concert was more 'inédites' than intended: the pianist Héléne Grimaud cancelled and was replaced, to everyone's amazement, by Angela Hewitt. The cult Canadian first played in Janáček's Concertino for piano, two



Sol Gabetta: peerless technique and rich imagination

MARCO BORGISCHINI

violins, viola, clarinet, horn and bassoon; the string heroes of the occasion were violinists Rachlin and **Kirill Troussov** and violist **Kim Kashkashian**. The work generally sounded spiky and ungrateful – it is awkward to pull off even with adequate rehearsal – and one sensed that the ensemble was feeling its way. The Dvořák Piano Quintet was a happier affair, with Emanuel Ax its mellifluous pianist; Kashkashian was joined by violinists **Joshua Bell** and **Miriam Contzen** and, in that wonderful cello part, **Mischa Maisky**. The players' stylistic contrasts were faintly uncomfortable: Bell and Maisky were two soloists on individual trajectories, while Ax and Contzen were calm, self-effacing partners. Kashkashian's glowing tone and sympathetic musicianship were the butter that smoothed a strange sandwich.

The second half, with the strings of the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra (VFCO), was even stranger. Conducted by Gábor Takács-Nagy, they produced the most passionate, incandescent, electrifyingly beautiful account of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* that it has ever been my pleasure

to encounter. The Hungarian violinist-turned-conductor's energy and commitment were almost reminiscent of his compatriot Georg Solti – and this isn't a comparison to make lightly. And the entire chamber orchestra played for him with the same galvanising joy and power as the original Takács Quartet. Then along came Hewitt for the Bach D minor Keyboard Concerto, directing from the piano. But after the Elgar, it was overshadowed before it began.

Morning chamber music (29 July) brought us Hindemith's Quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, with **Dmitry Sitkovetsky** at the helm plus cellist **Christian-Pierre La Marca**, Julian Bliss on clarinet and Simon Trpčeski at the piano. Sitkovetsky's absolute musicality and fatherly presence blended well with the youngsters' evident enjoyment of this unusual repertoire. And rare repertoire seems to be an increasing enthusiasm for this fine, still underappreciated artist – sadly I missed his marathon concert of contemporary works that he had commissioned. With Bliss and pianist Julien Quentin, he then offered a wonderful, earthy account of Bartók's *Contrasts*.

Even rarer was the performance of a startling Mendelssohn chamber work, the Sextet for piano and strings. Its line-up is bass-heavy – piano, violin, two violas, cello and double bass –

and Trousov sounded lonely at the top. But there could be no richer counterbalance to Yuja Wang's elegant piano firecrackers than violists **Maxim Rysanov** and the rising American star **David Aaron Carpenter**, Gabetta on cello and **Leigh Mesh** on double bass. Carpenter seemed to be both glue and engine to the group, his communication with his colleagues keeping their discourse unified, vivid and thrilling. The closing allegro went like the clappers and provoked an irresistible encore.

Carpenter and Gabetta were up to their magic again in Jean-Yves Thibaudet's *carte blanche* evening, in which they joined the French pianist, Rachlin and violinist **Boris Kuschnir** for the Franck Piano Quintet, a work in which you can almost smell the incense. Spontaneity, personality and plenty of verve were all here, though the music's mysticism would have benefited from even greater cohesion. Lastly, Bell, the VFCO and Takács-Nagy joined Thibaudet for Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin, Piano and Strings, in which the aim seemed to be to play as many notes per second as humanly possible, then add some – a lethal mix of hair-raising demands and terrifying exposure. The musical material is less rewarding beyond the technical bedazzlement, but for Bell and Thibaudet it's a perfect showpiece. What a whirl, and what a joy. Just like Verbier itself.