

Verbier Musical Festival Summer 2017

By Getta Neumann

The holidays in Verbier are the ones I'm looking forward to most each year and wouldn't miss for the world. Indeed, we haven't missed a festival for the last 14 years. This time I jotted down some of my impressions and sent them to a few friends. Now I put those notes together to share with the bjt readers.

History of the festival

One afternoon there was a talk for the Suisse Romande Radio, channel Espace 2, with Martin Engstroem, the founder and the director of the Festival and others. It was good to find out more about the beginnings of the festival.



Martin Engstroem (in the middle, wearing a blue shirt) engaging in a simultaneous chess competition with Vladimir Kramnik, chess master

Engstroem's mother had an impresario agency in Stockholm. At the time, since Russian artists were permitted to travel only in the Communist block, Finland and Sweden, there were many whom young Engstroem met and befriended. 24 years ago, when everything began in Verbier, a village most artists never heard of, with no infrastructure for a music festival, the first orchestra that resided here was the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra (it might have been the junior IPO) under the conductor Zubin Mehta. Actually the festival was cofounded by Avi Shoshani, the executive director of the IPO at present, and artistic counsellor of the Verbier Festival. There was a bunch of artists, Micha Maisky, Martha Argerich, Dmitri Sitkovietsky, Kissin, Yuryi Bashmet (by the way, rumors that he is Jewish are hopefully wrong, he is *Moyshe shiker*, the police had to be called in the middle of

the night because he, totally drunk, made such a row with or because of his very young girl-friend, as we were told by Erica from Arad who stayed at the same hotel:-D)

Back to the festival. Even at present it is based on personal relationships, on working together in a family-like atmosphere. Networking is the key to its success. Some artists stay for a week or for the whole duration of the festival, there are parties thrown for them in the luxurious chalets of the very rich owners, many Swiss and British, they meet and mingle and are happy to get together in the mountains without the constraint of a one-night stay in a hotel, packing and unpacking, with a tight schedule. They bring their families along, their children - e.g. we could see Maisky's family of his second marriage growing and him pushing a stroller with the latest baby. Some students of the Academy have become renowned artists and feel grateful and faithfully and regularly come back. The Verbier family has outgrown itself into a huge enterprise, but relationships are still essential. Engstroem gave us an example: a conductor cancels at the last minute. To find another of the same caliber is practically impossible if you don't have a personal relationship with that person. Daniil Trifonov cancelled, because he was afraid that he wouldn't be allowed to go back to the US - matter of visa, matter of Trump... What a shame! He was replaced by his teacher Sergej Babayan, a great pianist. An important part of the festival is the Academy - the "dreamers" as Engstroem called them, students who get private lessons and dream about a soloist career, and the "realists", those who practise in an orchestra. There were 1500 applications for the orchestra, 70 for one flutist position!

There are still many Israeli or Jewish musicians, maybe less than 14 years ago, when we started coming to the festival. This year there is a very promising pianist and conductor, the 28 year-old Lahav Shani. A shooting star! Very nice young man, but we disapproved a lot of his habit of smoking cigars - big, thick ones, yuck! You see, that's the downside of staying in the same village with the artists - you see them at a close range, sometimes much too close.

Some highlights



Concert in the new church in the Old Verbier. String trio with Boris Kuschnir, Lars Anders Tomter and Miklos Perenyi. Schubert, Beethoven, but no dramatic stuff at all, light and joyful music with smiles and winks exchanged between the musicians and small jokes – such as moments of silence which increased the suspense. Then Max Reger with a piece in a classical style.

In the afternoon master class with Tomter, the above mentioned viola player - one student was amazing, a contemporary piece, very emotional, at times agitated and aggressive, then warm, then bizarre like a drunken sailor . Then a long walk through the village, short stop on a terrace with a cappuccino and a remarkably good pop singer.

The church is beautiful inside: full of light, wood panel walls alternating with concrete and a stylized Christ where the accent is shifted from the Crucifixion to an embracing gesture of benediction.

Master class with Andras Schiff



From 9.30 until 12.30 master class with Sir Andras Schiff himself. In the room there were about 80 people in a semi-circle around the piano. I arrived at 9 o'clock sharp to reserve seats. I saw Jacques, our neighbor in Esery, at the entrance and I thought we were the first! No, the room was full, luckily he kept seats for us in the second row on the right so we could hear well and see the faces of Schiff and the student. Schiff made his entrance. You easily recognize the features of the 12-year old prodigy from the "Ki mit tud" contest ages ago on the Budapest TV. Delicate, dainty, his face is alert and when listening to music, transfigured, in a natural, not exaggerated manner. The first student was, surprise, a Romanian 24-year old, Andrei Gologan, from Piatra Neamt, but he quickly mentioned his girlfriend from Timisoara when he saw our disappointment . But that was after class. The second was a 15-year old boy from the Netherlands, more child than adult, so handsome and earnest, so cute and sooo gifted. Schiff was nice, really sweet, even tender, he was visibly impressed by their talent and youth. Who were the two artists with the greatest variety? he asked and answered: Beethoven and Shakespeare! He made so many profound remarks, I wish I could remember them. - This should be emotional, but not sentimental. - This sequence is the question, the next is the answer. You play a dialogue. - These notes are like drops - drip, drip, like twinkling stars in heaven. - Deafness for Beethoven was a chance. Else he could have never written such music, he had to imagine it in his head, not hear it. - B. marked a long pedal for several sequences, this washes away the harmonies and creates a rumbling sound. - Don't drop your hand from a height onto the key! We call this "parachuting". Watch videos with Rubinstein, Horowitz, nothing happens, they don't move a lot. This choreography is for the show.

An evening concert

Imagine the surprise we had in the evening when we discovered in the row behind us in the church, sitting nicely next to each other, Andras Schiff and Gabor Takacs-Nagy, talking and laughing. Those semi-gods in our physical proximity! So we all listened together to Brahms, Trio for piano and strings (Renaud Capuçon, Richard Goode and Edgar Moreau) and Schubert, Quintet Die Forelle. We were enthusiastic, the public was ecstatic, Andras and Gabor were discussing, seemingly not impressed... Our friends Hannah and Maurice were just in front of them, we were a bit further away and I thought it would be impolite if I switched with Hannah and my intention to eavesdrop on them would become obvious, so I didn't budge. What is it they didn't like? Was it too fast and tempestuous? We know that artists play differently in a master class, in a contest, in a concert hall or in a recording studio. To please the public, they play fast, with flourishing gestures, overdoing it, they know we appreciate the show and don't notice the nuances. However, it was a great concert, and enjoyed it, whether the famous musicians who were sitting there, besides Schiff and Takacs-Nagy, we noticed the two violonists from the Quatuor Ebene and others, appreciated more or less. By the way, guess how much a pianist of Schiff's fame gets for an evening concert, say in the Victoria Hall, Geneva? I guessed CHF 5000. Just add a zero, then you are right.

Concert with Andras Schiff

It is difficult to render the thrill of the evening concert with Andras Schiff . He walked to his piano - a Börsendorfer, he sometimes schlepps a Steinway or a Bechstein along, depending on the composer - sat down, took the microphone and spoke for 20 minutes. Slowly, articulating clearly, he talked about the pieces he was going to play, in the way a story-teller does, relishing the anecdotes, making humorous points. A pedagogical concert of the kind I haven't heard since Bernstein's lectures for kids. And, oh, how much we old people are in need of such guidance! The program was seemingly eclectic - 5 pieces, Bach and Bartok alternating, two composers so far away in time and style that we wouldn't dream of putting them together. We learned that they are not far apart at all. Both are Europeans, and Schiff told us about Bartok's work to record folklore tunes not only in Hungary, but also in many other countries (not only Romania) and he didn't miss the opportunity to slip in a jab at the present Hungarian nationalist politics. He talked in detail about the first piece by Bach, "Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother". This brother, an oboist, got a position in an orchestra in Sweden and Bach, still an adolescent, tearfully takes leave of him. First he pleads with him to stay, then he imagines the perils that await him on the journey, then he laments, then he imagines the coachman, "a very musical coachman", and the horse, "who is even more musical", and finally, the fugue, in which "the horse comments on the fugue". And thus spoke Schiff and went on to explain how the highly complicated counterpoint of Bach joins the highly dissonant piece of Bartok. After this warming-up introduction, Schiff considered that we are ready to enjoy his piano-playing, and, oh, wasn't that wonderful! We were witnesses to a re-creation, the pianist was not merely an interpreter, he

was a Creator. After the break he told us about Janacek, "In the mists" and Schumann, Fantaisie - both very emotional compositions. Janacek was mourning his 17-year old daughter's death, Schumann expressed his love for Clara - a certain harmony was the Clara motive - and his admiration for Beethoven - he quoted a Beethoven theme. Schiff illustrated his explanations by playing the motives. He also told us the story of a handwritten manuscript of Schumann, with corrections of this piece which he discovered, upon the pianist Charles Rosen's advice, in a library in Budapest. So exciting! We listened wide-eyed and were enchanted.

The concert was in the Eglise - about 250 seats, in an intimate atmosphere - you kind of hear the breathing of the audience, you share the same experience with others. I don't know if Schiff plays the same program in a big concert hall and if it has the same effect. Those who were present were all aware that they were very fortunate.

Concert in Les Combins, a huge tent with about 2000 seats

An afternoon concert with the Junior Verbier Orchestra - 50 kids between 15 and 18. The conductor was Joshua Weilerstein, young, 30 years old, already famous, very gifted. We were looking forward to Max Bruch's Kol Nidrei, with Edgar Moreau cello - a big disappointment. He played correctly, of course, but absolutely no passion, zero understanding of the piece. Awful! But Dvorak's Symphony was beautiful! Those kids were so enthusiastic, flushed with excitement they played passionately. They probably made mistakes, but who cares! It was a wonderful experience for them and for us. Then we sat on the large terrace sipping a glass of white wine in the evening sunshine.

The Swiss National Day when I went over the mountain



The sun was shining and there was no excuse for me not to go up with the cable-car and try to do the walk I last did some 5 years ago together with Danny. The trail starts at the Ruinettes, at 2200 m and goes to the Lac de Vaux 2550 m, not such a big difference, but it is climbing all the time and then, you know how it is, there is nothing more difficult than climbing, except going down. The path is winding on the side of the mountain, so I had all the time the station behind me and the pass which I had to cross in sight and the whistling of marmots to keep me company. On the top a herd of sheep, woolly and shaggy and with funny black faces were grazing some blades of grass between the rocks. It's a miracle how they can survive on that. Then the lakes appeared, actually there are 3, of which one is tiny, a beautiful sight and a moment of personal triumph.



I managed to go back and arrive just in time at La Chaux, 30 minutes walk from the cable car station, for an open-air concert with Verbier Festival Orchestra conducted by Gabor Takacs-Nagy. Hundreds came, cu copii si catei, a colorful audience, lounging on the grass, eating, drinking, putting on sun lotion. During the concert, Mozart, Overture to Figaro's Marriage and

Mendelssohn, Symphonie Ecosaise, no barking, no crying, it was pure joy, Gabor and the young musicians were enthusiastic as usual, people were just happy. Me too.



After the concert

Back in the chalet, after a quick shower, I rushed to the tent where Vladimir Kramnik, former number 1, at present 2 chess champion, played simultaneously against 17 people, most of them musicians. I recognized Gabor, Pletnev, Sitkovietski, Lugansky, Engstroem among them. I like watching these games, study the faces, see the reactions. All of them are very serious about it, very concentrated, some are kidding and chatting with Kramnik, seeking advice, mostly in Russian. The musicians were too strong so when I left after 40 minutes or so, there were still 12 playing. I wonder whether Kramnik managed to beat them all.



Nikolai Lugansky (middle) and Dimitri Sitkovietski (right)

The evening ended with a fondue tomate, I don't recommend it, it is a light, low-calorie fondue, neither fish nor fowl, without white wine and garlic, not the real thing. Not as if I cared much. I went to bed tired but happy.

Takeaways from master classes

It is particularly rewarding to attend master classes (they are free). It is at times exhilarating to witness how students improve their playing when they heed the teacher's advice. And it goes beyond music-playing, sometimes you get life-lessons.

Message. Music should sound as if it were composed right then, in front of the audience. It should be surprising and unpredictable, if not, it is boring. "There is a pause here, said one of the teachers, but don't relax, hold your breath! Even when not playing, you create suspense." The musical phrase should have a shape, a flow, a line. You have a story to tell, you have a message. Does it get through to the people in the back row?

Creativity. György Kurtág said that he has 2 nightmares: one is not to read the score correctly, the other to read only the score. Maria Callas said that once on the stage, after practising hard, she cut control, tried to feel free. The same was said by Martha Argerich who, within a frame, follows her intuition.

Perfection. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. You make a mistake, who cares? Don't think about the past. If a race car driver thinks about the second he lost in a curve, he will only slow down more in the next one.

Tim Carrol in his opera master class recalled a famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. In the foreground a peasant turns his back to us, busy to plough the field. A herdsman is dreaming amidst his sheep. A fisherman is pulling his fishing-rod. The sails of the boat swell. Nobody cares about the foolish Icarus plunging into the sea, Nobody notices the foolishly dangling white legs of Icarus. The tragic end of the poor youth does not disturb the course of the world. Life goes on.



Verbier Festival 2018 is the 25th anniversary of the festival. I am sure there will be many more things to discover and learn.

