

AMATI

REVIEW: Amati goes to...Gstaad

As Yehudi Menuhin's centenary approaches, Jessica Duchon explores his legacy at the magical festival he founded in Gstaad, Switzerland

The year 2016 marks the centenary of Yehudi Menuhin's birth. With anniversary celebrations already gearing up in plentiful locations, it seemed a fine moment to visit the festival he founded in Gstaad to see how his legacy has left its mark on the Swiss Alps.

Gstaad sits at the convergence of a collection of gorgeous and navigable mountains, famed for glorious ski-slopes and in winter attracting the sort of clientele that might appreciate après-ski amid a startling number of high street chalet shops devoted to designer clothing and jewels. Summer is another matter. Now it's Switzerland as Fuzzy Felt might portray it: green hillsides dotted with cattle and ponies feasting on wild flowers, hang-gliders trekking up the mountains to sail out from the summits, hikers equipped with back-packs, sticks and sun cream marching out and pointedly ignoring the cable cars and funiculars that carry the rest of us up and down at leisure.

It's small wonder that Menuhin fell in love with the place and moved there with his family back in 1957. That same year he joined forces with Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Maurice Gendron to present two concerts in an early 17th-century church in nearby Saanen (five minutes from Gstaad on the train, or a 35-minute riverside stroll). Soon two concerts morphed to nine in the Yehudi Menuhin Musiksommer; and for a couple of decades friendly chamber music in the church laid the basis for all that was to follow.

Expansion began in the 1970s, with the foundation of the International Menuhin Music Academy around the same time as the Yehudi Menuhin School in the UK; in the late 1980s further growth brought with it a concert tent

and the presence of full-scale symphony orchestras. Non-mountainous ups and downs over the decades were possibly inevitable once Menuhin himself was no longer in charge; but now, under the directorship since 2002 of Christoph Müller, formerly director of the Basel Chamber Orchestra, the event has achieved both stability and international acclaim.

The festival is also the base for the Gstaad Festival Academy, which is attracting highly gifted students from Europe, America and the Far and Middle East alike. Professors at its violin academy this year were Igor Ozim and Wonji Kim; viola masterclasses were given by Ettore Causa and cellists coached by Ivan Monighetti; pianists could study with András Schiff; young conductors worked with Neeme Järvi, Gennady Rozhdestvensky and Leonid Grin, the fine and flexible Gstaad Festival Orchestra in residence and at their disposal. Singing masterclasses and a baroque academy have added to the mix; and many sessions are open for the public to observe.

Claire Bourg, an American violin student from Boston's New England Conservatory, was attending the academy for the first time and was full of enthusiasm: "It's extremely well organised and we each have five lessons," she says. "I've never been to Switzerland before – it's wonderful being here." Not that she had much time to enjoy the hiking: there was serious practising to be done.

Gstaad's concert tent is a few gentle minutes' walk away beside the river from the village centre. You won't be surprised to hear that concerts in tents can be a mixed blessing; and their sizes, shapes and acoustics vary more than you might expect. Gstaad, though, has solved the problem by building a highly effective acoustic shell around the platform in its multi-sided marquee. It may not be ideal – the sound can seem somehow flattened out at highish volume – but never is there a problem hearing what's going on.

My visit began with a concert featuring no less a star than Jonas Kaufmann. First, though, the festival theme of 'Irony and Music' was reflected – with somewhat mixed results – in the 22-year-old Richard Strauss's four-movement tone poem *Aus Italien*: scenic pieces depicting aspects of Italy,

opening with a suitably gorgeous mountain landscape, but featuring in its finale a somewhat clunky attempt to conscript 'Funiculi, funicular' into an orchestral setting...which might just account for the work's general absence from the mainstream repertoire. The Basel Symphony Orchestra was conducted in a streamlined if understated performance by Jochen Rieder, Kaufmann's frequent musical partner; the tone was largely elegant rather than effusive, though the cello section proved particularly impressive, with fine ensemble and eloquent phrasing.

Kaufmann contributed four short arias to the second half – selections from Italian verismo including 'Cielo e mar' from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* and 'E lucevan le stelle' from Puccini's *Tosca*, these brief glimpses cushioned on either side by the inevitable orchestral excerpts. It all fitted in snugly with the Italian-themed evening.

Still, matters only took off in earnest when Kaufmann launched into his first encore, which was certainly not Italian. His skill with encores, the stagecraft of working the hall and fanning its bellows, paid multiple dividends: the mood shifted with the very first chord of 'Dein ist mein ganzes Herz' as if a dam had broken, and before long this generally staid festival crowd was on its feet, cheering, while Kaufmann bounded joyously on to the conductor's podium to bow, then exited punching the air. He's a rock star.

Any successful festival risks losing magic to expansion – and you can find yourself hunting amid the champagne bars for a glass of water. But Gstaad has the best of both worlds. Its original venue, the church in Saanen, still hosts recitals and chamber music – and this venue possesses a large dose of what we could term 'sacred space syndrome'. Its interior mingles refurbished wood with ancient frescoes, while offering a warm, deep, clear acoustic and an atmosphere that encourages an intensity of listening that's a world apart. It was in here that Menuhin, Britten, Pears and Gendron gave those first concerts. And it was in here that the young Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov delivered possibly the most astonishing recital I've heard all of this year, and last as well.

He opened with Brahms's transcription for left hand alone of the Bach Chaconne. It's an austere, dark-hued version, the composer having suggested that only by writing for just one hand could he transfer to the instrument the challenge and complexity posed by Bach's violin original. Trifonov let its variations emerge almost as a stream of consciousness, travelling ever further inwards. Brahms's version may sound more in the cello register than violin, yet it could still arguably be said, if compared to Busoni's more famous transcription, to be the truer of the two in spirit.

The Bach was well complemented by Rachmaninov's Variations on a Theme of Corelli, in which Trifonov's grasp of colour, perspective, voicing and overall structure could scarcely have been bettered; the work emerged almost in concerto style, its shape not unlike a mini-Paganini Rhapsody. The second half, though, consisted entirely of Liszt's 12 Etudes d'exécution transcendente. I heard Trifonov play them at the Royal Festival Hall about a year ago, an edge-of-seat performance indeed, but relatively raw compared to what came out of the piano in Gstaad.

Trifonov has lived with the pieces for longer now, and performed them many more times; instead of emerging as a battle of man and instrument, the music left no doubt that he has reached the summit of the mighty demands these pieces pose and is ready, like those hang-gliders, to go up there and soar. As a cycle, too, he built them into an emotional succession in which transitions and silences between were an essential part of the music.

The lightness of 'Feux Follets' glimmered and smiled; the long build-up and immense colouristic range of 'Harmonies du soir' shimmered with sensuality; and even the ferocity of 'Mazeppa' – often considered 'unplayable' – sounded unforced and logical. 'Paysage' emerged deeply meditative, affectionate and spiritually at peace, just as a landscape should in the mountains; and 'Chasse-neige' formed a chilling conclusion, leaving us staring over the precipice into a snow-filled chasm.

If only Menuhin himself could have been there to hear it.