

Verbier Festival, Various Venues, Verbier ****

By Jessica Duchon

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Every year, the Verbier Festival transforms an off-season ski resort into a wonderful musical galaxy. Over a fortnight, top international soloists give both concerts and masterclasses, and this year, there was a choice of two recitals each evening, the second being in the more intimate venue of a church, up the road from the giant concert tent.

Chamber music remains at the festival's heart. Verbier's ethos is to team up artists who haven't played together before, ensuring some unpredictable chemistry. One concert opened with three Mozart chamber works, each a vehicle for a woodwind soloist: first, the Danish recorder virtuoso Michala Petri, tackling the Flute Quartet K285; then 16-year-old British clarinetist Julian Bliss, whose playing lives up to his name; and the extraordinary Russian oboist Alexei Ogrintchouk, each backed by an all-star string team, including the violinist Janine Jansen and her partner Julian Rachlin on the viola.

The second half mingled the cool-headed violinist Leonidas Kavakos, the effusive cellist Mischa Maisky, and the powerful pianist Elena Bashkirova in Schubert's B flat Piano Trio - proving that mutual respect, masterful listening and inspired response can make very different musicians more fascinating partners than similar ones.

The following evening found the pianist Evgeny Kissin serving as accompanist - first, to Thomas Quasthoff singing Schubert. The great baritone's empathy for Schubert's sense of pain was devastating, especially in "Erlkönig" and "Der Zwerg": chilling, profound and unforgettable. Next, Kissin partnered the Russian cellist Alexander Kniazev in sonatas by Franck and Shostakovich. Though Kissin's playing remained self-effacing and exemplary, Kniazev's lurid excesses milked every note for pseudo-emotional extremity: the music scarcely kept its cohesion for a moment. That morning, in a masterclass, the cellist Ralph Kirshbaum had chided a student for putting himself before the composer by adding extraneous expression. Kniazev should have been there.

Still, you don't go to Verbier for predictability. There's no safety net, and that's why it's marvellous.

