

CULTURE

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for China Daily

There were gentle gasps inside the valley-shaped concert hall when Mischa Maisky quietly took his seat among the audience. With his iconic long hair and Indian necklaces, the world-renowned cellist became just another audience member, waiting for five classical stars to perform Schumann's *Piano Quintet in E-flat Major*.

"We're all musicians who try to communicate through music, a unique and universal language," said the artist at the first Asian edition of the Verbier Festival, which concluded in Shenzhen on Feb 8.

The festival's decision to venture beyond its Swiss Alpine origins created immediate anticipation after its August 2025 announcement. Of the 23,000 tickets sold, roughly 70 percent went to audiences from outside Shenzhen. Beneath the wood-and-glass canopy of Shenzhen Concert Hall, the crowd reflected a rare cosmopolitan mix.

Music lovers flew in from places like Dubai and Vladivostok. Jean-Philippe Jutzi, former cultural counselor of the embassy of Switzerland in China, came with his wife. Both have been volunteers for the festival in Switzerland. Audience member Preetha Pillai from Singapore was waiting in line with her piano teacher Ms Lim, who has also taught her nephews, sister and mother. "I saw that the festival was coming to Shenzhen on Instagram and wanted to hear Martha Argerich again," Pillai says. "I mentioned it to my teacher, and she immediately started looking for tickets."

The audience response was spontaneous. Mikhail Pletnev, conducting Beethoven's *Symphony No 1 in C Major*, was so insistent that he asked the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra to repeat the majestic final movement as an encore. "The audience is really enjoying the music. It's absolutely simple and beautiful," says Maisky.

When the artists did return to the green room, the mood was familial. Artists exchanged stories and discussed repertoire like old friends. Festival founder Martin Engstroem often describes Verbier as a place of "challenge", a catchphrase he loves. Another catchphrase is "pocket money", which he refers to whenever asked about how much he pays these superstars.

The camaraderie is also evident. Beloved artists like Maisky, Pletnev, Joshua Bell, Gautier Capucon, Janine Jansen and Daniel Blendulf (who are a couple) appeared in several concerts featuring works by composers from Johann Sebastian Bach to Dmitri Shostakovich, and female composers like Rebecca Clarke.

The Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra, with members from leading orchestras on different continents, performed symphonic works by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Dvorak. The orchestra was merged into a single unit by the magnetic conductor Gabor Takacs-Nagy. Joshua Bell also conducted the orchestra in Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor*.

But it was the chamber programs that attracted die-hard fans, who listened to artists from Blythe Teh Engstroem and Daniel Lozakovich, to Timothy Ridout and Minsoo Sohn. Pletnev, Bruce Liu, Denis Kozhukhin and Alexander Malofeev performed not only solo recitals, but also in duos, trios, quartets, quintets, and sextets respectively. Sir Bryn Terfel joined conductor Gianluca Marciano, performing at the Longgang International Arts Center completed ahead of schedule for the occasion.

Speaking of the festival created in 1994, Martin Engstroem's close friend, pianist Martha Argerich, famously said that Verbier is a place where artists play works they haven't played before and work with colleagues they haven't played with before.

When Argerich withdrew because of health concerns, panic flickered briefly. But at Verbier, stars reinforce one another. Pletnev, Kozhukhin, Yuja Wang, and Zhang Haochen filled the gap. Lang Lang, absent from Verbier for years, performed on Feb 3 before appearing days later at the Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Milan.

"Home country with Verbier spirit!" Yuja Wang wrote on her 5-million-follower Instagram account, punctuating the post with a mountain emoji. Wang's parents also came. Her mother prepared a crimson Tang suit for Martin Engstroem.

Artists like Wang have spent many summers at Verbier in the Alps with hikers, students and fans. To get there, you get off the train at Martigny, before the RegionAlps commuter rail or the cable car takes you up the mountains, opening up to a breathtaking view of Mont Blanc. "I first went there when I was 15 for the Verbier Festival Academy. I remember getting off the train and I was like: Oh! What is this?" recalls pianist Denis Kozhukhin. "So Martin's known me since I was a boy."

Engstroem's path to founding the festival was unconventional. Learning the piano as a teenager in Stockholm, he studied music history and Russian in Stockholm, before becoming a top-tier manager in the years of vinyl records and CDs. He has played chess with Gregor Piatigorsky, worked with Herbert von Karajan and produced Puccini's *Turandot* at the Forbidden City with Zubin Mehta and Zhang Yimou.

In the summer of 1991, as his former wife, soprano Barbara Hendricks went touring in southern France, Engstroem took their two children to Verbier, an hour's drive from their home in Montreux. At the time, Verbier was only known as a ski resort, Engstroem saw the



Left: Janine Jansen, Marc Bouchkov, Bruce Liu, Timothy Ridout and Daniel Blendulf perform Schumann's *Piano Quintet in E-flat Major* at the Verbier Festival 2026 Shenzhen on Feb 2. Right: Joshua Bell, Denis Kozhukhin and Mischa Maisky perform Mendelssohn's *Piano Trio No 1 in D Minor* at the event on Feb 4. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SHENZHEN CONCERT HALL



Alpine festival swells into Asia's crescendo

Verbier lands in China, where global artists perform boldly, guide young players, and draw new audiences into a living classical music tradition



Top: Marc Bouchkov, Zhang Haochen, Lir Vaginsky, Timothy Ridout and Daniel Mitnitsky perform Schumann's *Piano Quintet in E-flat Major* at the Verbier Festival 2026 Shenzhen on Jan 31. XIA XIAOFAN / FOR CHINA DAILY Above left: Daniel Lozakovich rehearses with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra conducted by Gabor Takacs-Nagy on Jan 30. XIA XIAOFAN AND ZHANG RUONAN / FOR CHINA DAILY Above right: Sir Bryn Terfel sings for local residents at Lianhuashan Park in Shenzhen on Feb 8. LI LEWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY



potential to create a vibrant summer season based on classical music.

He telephoned executives at Nestle, BNP Paribas and United Bank of Switzerland repeatedly. After persistent negotiations with corporate sponsors, the festival was launched in 1994 to inspire both young musicians and superstars. "Everyone learns something," says Engstroem. In its first edition, the festival featured a youth orchestra conducted by Zubin Mehta. Mischa Maisky was there from the beginning, along with stars like Evgeny Kissin and Maxim Vengerov.

"Unfortunately, money has always been an issue," admits Engstroem. The first year's budget was 1.8 million Swiss francs (\$2.3 million). Now, it has grown to 13 million. Verbier has also become a sought-after destination. Shops display pictures with music stars who stop to look at Swiss watches. Everyone is part of the community.

Early concerts were held in a non-sound-proof tent. "It rains three or four times during the festival, so concerts had to stop because it was too loud," recalls Engstroem. A temporary structure was later added to improve acoustics, marking the beginning of a steady evolution from makeshift stage to global institution.

In Shenzhen, conditions could not have been more different. During the 10-day festival, it did not rain once.



Mischa Maisky (front) performs Camille Saint-Saens' *Cello Concerto No 1 in A Minor* with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra on Feb 8. COURTESY OF THE SHENZHEN CONCERT HALL

Outside the Shenzhen Concert Hall, local children on winter break skated across the tree-lined square while migratory birds chirped overhead. Near the library and the concert hall — symmetrical architecture designed by late Pritzker Prize winner Arata Isozaki — piano lovers practiced in small booths they booked on smartphones.

Backstage, the spirit of adaptation remained essential. Organizers at Shenzhen Concert Hall scrambled to secure a backup instrument for chamber orchestra cellist Roric Cunningham after his 1923 cello, crafted by French luthier Albert Caressa, was delayed at Boston Airport amid heavy snowstorms. Four musicians from the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra joined the chamber orchestra to perform Dvorak's *Symphony No 9 in E Minor, From the New World*.

However, the road from Verbier to a new land had been "a bumpy ride," says Engstroem.

In 2008, at a conference in Kazakhstan, he met a "tall man" from China. Wu Jiatong is a passionate music lover who happens to run one of Asia's largest classical music agencies, managing tours like the Vienna Philharmonic in China and Egypt. The two men clicked instantly and shared a helicopter ride to the northern Tianshan Mountains.

Engstroem recalls he was struck by Wu's "energy." "We share similar visions," recalls Wu.

Over the years, the duo shared more ideas and more helicopter rides. In 2018, while visiting the Himalayas, they noticed similar spiritual parallels between the Alps and the Himalayas. There, they conceived the idea of expanding Verbier to Asia.

The first choice was Yanguan, a culturally rich little town in Zhejiang. "I bought the all-wood Opera des Nations theater in Geneva, which used to be the Opera-Comique during Louis XIV's reign," says Wu. Piece by piece, he had the removable theater shipped to Yanguan for reconstruction during COVID lockdowns. Despite the efforts, it was not completed on time.

Then came the idea to build a temporary Verbier pavilion in Hong Kong's West Kowloon near the M+ Museum landmark, but differences with local partners stalled the plan.

When Shenzhen took over, there were fewer than 12 months to prepare. "There were even plans to train a youth orchestra for Verbier in Asia — just not enough time. Going forward, we will expand the youth learning programs," says Ding Zhongyuan, deputy director of the Shenzhen Municipal Culture, Media, Tourism and Sports Bureau. Ding visited Verbier last summer and heard Teodor Currentzis conduct Brahms and Mendelssohn with soloist Marc Bouchkov.

Verbier's famed young musician training programs were introduced through seven master classes led by Bouchkov, Capucon, Jansen, Maisky, Ridout, Sohn, and Takacs-Nagy. Stephen McHolm, who heads the Verbier Festival Academy, organized the sessions and oversees the academy's artist development work, combining high-level musical training with concert programming and professional preparation for young musicians.

"I guess you could say that I'm a Verbier product," says Michael Fuller, deputy artistic director of the Verbier Festival in Shenzhen, who was also a founding member and double bass player in the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra. He and his wife Lulu Fuller, a violinist, were both trained by the Verbier orchestra programs.

Orchestra executives, conservatory deans, foundation leaders and talent scouts also attended to discover and cultivate the next Yuja Wangs or Lang Langs. As Engstroem puts it, the formula for a musical career today involves "a lot to do with personality, a little bit of luck, and a lot about the network."

McHolm, who has directed Verbier's academy programs for nine years, stands close to the center of that network. In his work pants and carrying a backpack, he spent hours advising young musicians. "Still wanna play the cello?" he joked with Xie Tingyu, a young cellist who just finished her master class with Gautier Capucon.

"Yeah, sure!" replied the 15-year-old, as her mother and cello professor Zhang Fan listened attentively. The trio had traveled from Chengdu. Victor Yuanhan Lu, a 21-year-old pianist from Chengdu and an academy alumna, helped Xie's teacher Zhang Fan translate his questions for McHolm.

Wu recently launched the China Young Musicians Program under the Wu Zezhou Foundation, honoring his father. "Talent must learn when and how to make the right decisions," he said — blunt, practical, realistic.

Equally important is cultivating audiences. Wang Jun, pregnant with her third child, says she bought two Verbier tickets for her young daughters. Nearby, three sixth-graders from a local school orchestra secured tickets for just 20 yuan (\$2.88) through a student discount initiative by the concert hall. "The original ticket costs hundreds," says one mother, who asked to remain anonymous. The parents waited outside the symphony hall, watching their children hurry into the queue.

Herve Boissiere, now co-CEO of the Verbier Festival, was also in Shenzhen. The veteran producer, known for founding medici.tv, the classical music's version of YouTube, noted that livestreaming did not take place in Shenzhen this year. Engstroem called it a "lost opportunity," but both believe the event will still be archived and shared globally in the coming months.

As opera houses and orchestras in the West confront mounting challenges, Asia is emerging as a new focal point. Seoul and Taipei have approached Engstroem and Wu to consider their cities. "We're here, and we're very grateful," Engstroem says. "At the moment, we'd like to make a three-year deal with Shenzhen," says Engstroem. A three-year partnership was announced a day after this festival, with the next Verbier Festival Shenzhen to be held in February 2027.

But ultimately, artists simply want to play music for everyone. They rehearsed, discussed compositions, and rode a carousel at the hotel. They marveled at LED displays and sang for locals in the park. There were even proposals to bring Chinese restaurants to the Alps. They smiled in selfies with fans and played little pranks. Gautier Capucon and violinist Alexandra Conunova mimicked a smartphone ringtone coming off stage. "We all have perfect pitch, so we can absolutely repeat the same melody or play some variations," says Conunova in a group interview.

In July, Maisky, Argerich and Jansen will reunite in Switzerland. In October 2027, nine Verbier concerts are scheduled at Carnegie Hall. Ultimately, the ambition is simple. "We try to help people to be more positive and kind, and nurture their better side, in order to avoid conflicts which are unfortunate," says Maisky.

The author is a freelance writer for China Daily.