

ANNE DUCHASTEL

András Schiff and Evgeny Kissin performed together at this year's Verbier Festival



Live Reviews

VERBIER

Salle des Combins
Evgeny Kissin, András Schiff 28 July
Église de Verbier
Mikhail Pletnev 26 July
Nikolai Lugansky 27 July
Bruce Liu 28 July

The magic word ‘Verbier’ echoes round the world as a synonym for musical excellence, but it’s worth remembering the origin of this Alpine festival. Springing from the fertile brain of its founder and co-director Martin Engstroem, it was originally designed simply as a big summer party with music. But Engstroem’s high-level connections ensured that the music at that party was of a stratospherically high standard. Verbier is where many of today’s global stars were first spotted, often in the ranks of the Verbier Festival Academy, which draws young talents from all over the world. And year after year those musicians come back to perform, and – under Engstroem’s guidance – to experiment in ways that would be almost unthinkable in the ordinary world below.

Who else would be able to schedule a four-hand recital by Evgeny Kissin and András Schiff – and get them to agree like obedient lambs to do it, humping their benches across the stage in a programme where *primo* and *secondo* were in constant alternation? As the programme note put it, this 2026 highlight looked like being a meeting of fire and ice, ‘and it should be easy to differentiate between them’.

But it wasn’t at all. Busy camerawork suggested very different approaches to the instrument – Schiff’s gnarled fingers jabbing, Kissin’s youthful hands moving sinuously – but Mozart’s Sonata in D major for two pianos, K448, came over sweetly with the players’ respective sounds in a perfect melding, after which Schiff gave Kissin a tender paternal embrace. Then they embarked on two Schumann rarities – *Bilder aus Osten*, Op 66, and the *Andante and Variations*, Op 46. A two-piano arrangement of ‘Vltava’ from Smetana’s *Má vlast* didn’t feel right in this form, but the players clearly revelled in the extracts from Dvořák’s *Slavonic Dances* with which their programme ended. And there was more in what increasingly came over like a jam session, with a waltz and a

Hungarian Dance from Brahms, and a Schubert *Marche militaire*. Schiff could have gone on all night, but a smiling Kissin gently indicated that it was time to halt.

This year – like every other year – pianism was the driving force at Verbier, with a dizzying range of stars, several of whom I caught in chamber music and three in solo recital. I associate Mikhail Pletnev primarily with Beethoven and Russian repertoire, so his solo recital of Bach, Schumann and Grieg sounded too interesting to miss. And the first section of his recital was indeed unexpected: five Bach Preludes and Fugues seemingly chosen at random. But each had been completely rethought, with wonderful results: each had its own armoury of colours and effects, and purveyed its own unique spell; No 16 in G minor was decorated with the prettiest extended trills in the

world. If only Pletnev would record the lot.

But in Pletnev’s hands Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* opened uneasily, as though he wasn’t sure what line to take with its crazy emotional kaleidoscope. But once he got going, the emotional trajectory became a reflection of his own, and thus – as with his Bach – a unique musical journey. Meanwhile, Pletnev has joined the select ranks of senior pianists who devotedly perform Grieg’s often-spurned *Lyric Pieces*: his personal pick-and-mix of 16 of them was a riot of colour.

Year in, year out, Nikolai Lugansky is another member of the Verbier faithful and he reliably draws the crowd with the promise not of startling revelations but of sheer musical truth. And so it was with his recital this year: apart from Schumann’s *Humoreske*, Op 20, his programme was all Chopin, the first three Impromptus and the complete Preludes. Nobody can outdo the burnished beauty of this Russian’s sound, or the poetry he can find in over-familiar music.

But the revelation for me was Bruce Liu’s recital. I had previously heard this cool Canadian only in concertos, having

never heard him give a solo recital, and had no great expectations of his eclectic Verbier menu. But the Ligeti with which he started (‘Fanfares’, from the first book of *Études*) won me over with its sweetness, and Bach’s *French Suite* No 5 that followed was an exemplification of warmth, loving precision and faithfully delineated character. Then came Beethoven’s *Waldstein* Sonata in a reading that – though very different – could give Stephen Hough’s interpretation a formidable run for its money (see my review on page 72). Then came Chopin’s D flat major Nocturne, Op 27 No 2, Ravel’s *Alborada del gracioso*, some Mompou and Albéniz, and finally Liszt’s *Rhapsodie espagnole*. Liu joined the growing crowd who play Schubert’s charming F minor *Moment musical*, D780 No 3, as an encore. Every note of this superb recital was imbued with a relaxed authority.

But the most astonishing revelation to come out of Verbier this year is the fact that the festival is going to replicate itself in the Chinese city of Shenzhen. When this was mooted a year ago it sounded like Martin Engstroem’s pipe dream, with too many cultural barriers to be feasible. But on the day I arrived, so did a 19-strong delegation from Shenzhen, ready to watch how the complicated Verbier operation works, with its concerts, masterclasses and multifarious musical fringe attractions.

‘The idea of doing something in China has been in my mind for many years,’ says Engstroem. ‘I had always been struck by the fact that although there were many great Chinese musicians playing in Europe, there were very few festivals in China.’ And last winter he and a like-minded group of Chinese musical administrators did a dummy run of Verbier in Shenzhen, which proved a great success.

‘All the concerts were full,’ says Engstroem. ‘I knew our brand was strong in Asia, but not that strong.’ He likens the way Lang Lang has sparked piano mania in China and Korea to the way Borg sparked tennis mania in the West. He stresses the fact that Shenzhen is by Chinese standards a very open-minded city – much more so than Hong Kong, which lost the chance to host the Chinese Verbier because of its lukewarm initial response to the idea.

Engstroem points out that while 30 per cent of the festival’s audiences were based in Shenzhen, the other 70 per cent came from all over the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao area. So the time for this new development is ripe: the next edition of Verbier Festival Shenzhen will run from 9 to 18 February 2027. And like its begetter in Switzerland, it will field some familiar names: Sergei Babayan, Yuja Wang, Behzod Abduraimov, Mikhail Pletnev ... Thus will the benign philosophy of Verbier propagate itself.

MICHAEL CHURCH

ALDEBURGH

Snappe Maltings, Britten Studio
Steven Osborne 18 June
Guillaume de Chassy 20 June
Pierre-Laurent Aimard 21 June
Julius Asal 26 June

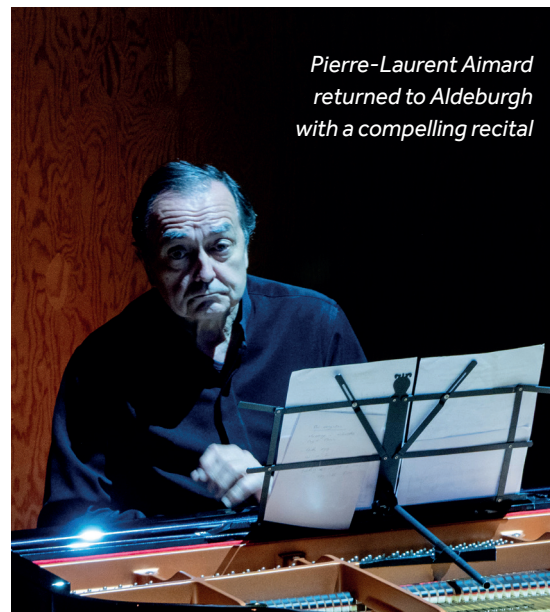
In Suffolk the summer solstice was marked by a homecoming from Aldeburgh Festival’s former Artistic Director (2009-16) Pierre-Laurent Aimard. With the Britten Studio’s rake sold out, additional seats were positioned on stage around a keyboard stone circle. This – one of the most compelling piano recitals I have experienced, topped only by the same pianist’s immersive 2016 performance of Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux* – opened seemingly without its soloist, as recorded fragments from Kurtág’s *Játékok* (‘Games’, 1973 onwards) played out through the Yamaha C3 Disklavier. The technique was destabilising in its simplicity; as was the programming, which alternated between Schubert and Kurtág – and, just when our brains had settled on this musical see-saw, lobbed in some serialist snippets.

Now Aimard was seated at the Yamaha CFX, where Schoenberg’s *Six Little Pieces*, Op 19, were deliberately etched. He rose slowly, thoughtfully, moving at an almost comical pace to the Yamaha upright (U3) where the continuing Schubert-Kurtág selections were blistered by Webern’s *Variations*,

Op 27. And, surprise! The next upright, hidden in darkness, was not an upright at all but a celesta, which timbrally fractured Kurtág’s ‘A window on the corridor’. Ballast came with Schubert’s 36 *Originaltänze*, D365 – back at the CFX – each as delicate as hand-blown glass, collectively becoming concrete. Nervous applause punctuated the silence; it was too dark to read the supporting note (if you could follow it anyway); was it over? Another surprise: on another U3 up in the balcony behind, a final Schubert-Kurtág sandwich was sliced. When Aimard eventually returned to pianohenge, the applause was rapturous.

‘If you’re waiting for something to happen, you’ll be disappointed,’ warned Steven Osborne as he introduced his Crumb and Feldman recital, referring to the latter’s 1986 work *Palais de Mari*, which took the lion’s share of the morning concert. Osborne was only half-joking; the shimmering sparse expanse is the closest music comes to meditation, in the sense that, in its truest form, no narrative is permitted (Feldman often swapped bars to ensure that no such arc could form unintended). *Palais de Mari* invokes the imperfect symmetry of the ancient Babylonian palace, its flawed reflections beautifully mirrored by Osborne, with damper pedal depressed throughout. It’s so quiet I can barely write; my neighbour’s stomach growls at what seems like a *fortissimo* marking.

Pierre-Laurent Aimard returned to Aldeburgh with a compelling recital



This piece – and the rest of his Aldeburgh programme – features on Osborne’s 2016 Hyperion recording, which expertly catches the music’s ricocheting extremities. Osborne moved between the keys and the guts of the piano for Crumb’s *A Little Suite for Christmas ‘AD 1979’* – ‘The Shepherd’s Noël’ demands plucking, muting and sliding strings – forming harmonic halos. Although he wasn’t an official ‘featured’ artist – that honour went to Ryan Wigglesworth for this, the 77th instalment of the annual event founded by Britten and Pears – Osborne featured prominently, including as the soloist for Wigglesworth’s quirky Piano Concerto with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (14 June). He also popped up in the Pumphouse, the compact former industrial building occasionally repurposed by Aldeburgh Festival for the more off-the-wall performances. In Osborne’s case, this was an absorbing version of Rzewski’s *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* and some beguiling improvisations. Our pianist modestly provided a disclaimer that he was not a proper jazz musician – many would beg to disagree.

As backing artist, accompanist and soloist, Guillaume de Chassy had a tough gig in *East West Street*, a mix of narration, analysis and music inspired by Philippe Sands’s 2016 book on the origins of international criminal law in the aftermath of the Second World War. De Chassy provided a Beethoven bed (the *Adagio cantabile* from the *Pathétique*) while leading human rights lawyer Sands explained how the concept of ‘crimes against humanity’ came to be. Music was the thread that linked zigzagging accounts – at the time of the Nuremberg trial Hans Frank, Nazi governor general of occupied Poland, and Hersch Lauterpacht, the lawyer campaigning for appropriate legislation, were both listening to Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*. De Chassy’s performance – including Prokofiev’s *Overture on Hebrew Themes* – was astutely poignant.

Suffolk bore the brunt of June’s brutal heatwave, with the UK’s hottest temperatures recorded just inland from Snape. The ensuing travel chaos meant that Julius Asal arrived at his concert by a whisker – though you would never have guessed this from the beautifully assured

playing. Lera Auerbach’s *Love Letters of Emma Hauck* – a Britten Pears Arts co-commission with BBC Radio 3 and the Henry Barber Trust, available in the UK via BBC Sounds in due course – is, in Asal’s words, ‘a deep dive into someone’s soul’. Hauck (1878-1920) was in 1909 committed to a psychiatric institution in Germany, from where she wrote multiple (undelivered) letters to her husband repeating the same words ‘Herzensschatzi, komm’ (Darling, come) thousands of times. Asal opened the door to this chiselled sound world, with its dazzling upper-octave trills and grumbling virtuosity. It was a foil to Rachmaninov’s luxuriously melodic Preludes, Op 32, in which Asal moved from elusive to elegant to expansive. An impressive finale to this pianist’s stint as a BBC New Generation Artist.

CLAIRE JACKSON

VAIL, COLORADO

Vilar Performing Arts Center
Anne-Marie McDermott, Yefim Bronfman
21 July
Vail Interfaith Chapel
Fei-Fei Dong 21, 23 July
Gerald R Ford Amphitheater
Anne-Marie McDermott, Yefim Bronfman
24 July

In the Colorado Rockies, amid Vail’s Tyrolean-style village architecture, the Bravo! Vail Music Festival may be best known for its annual parade of resident orchestras. Yet Anne-Marie McDermott’s farewell summer after 16 seasons as Artistic Director gave the piano particular prominence. She opened as soloist in all five Beethoven concertos, programmed all 32 sonatas in a series of eight free recitals by younger pianists and made several chamber and concerto appearances herself. McDermott spoke of wanting her farewell season to underline her identity as a serious pianist. Across four July events I attended, that emphasis offered a revealing perspective on the festival she has shaped.

The Beethoven sonata project brought together two enduring McDermott

priorities: immersive engagement with complete cycles and the encouragement of younger pianists. The eight recitals were shared among Illia Ovcharenko, Tatiana Dorokhova, Vitaly Starikov, Fei-Fei Dong and Chaeyoung Park. Dong, a 2013 Van Cliburn Competition finalist and former Bravo! Vail Piano Fellow, took on seven sonatas across two afternoons at the intimate Vail Interfaith Chapel.

Her first programme – including Op 2 No 3, Op 10 No 3, Op 26 and the *Waldstein*, Op 53 – immediately established the scale of her playing. Performing from memory, Dong drew a large, clear sound from the Bösendorfer and sustained an ambitious sequence with impressive concentration. I sometimes wanted more give in Beethoven’s rhetoric. Attacks could be insistent; repeated material in Op 2 No 3 in particular returned with much the same profile, where changes of colour or emphasis might have brought more of a sense of argument. But the *Adagio* showed greater delicacy, and she paced the *Introduzione* of the slow movement of the *Waldstein* with admirable patience, then let the finale unfurl with remarkable control rather than spending its energy at once.

Two days later, Dong revealed a broader range. A heavy downpour swept across the parched landscape during the first half – ‘Beethoven brought the rain’, McDermott joked at the interval – but Dong held her focus with a spacious *Pastoral*, Op 28, articulating its recurrent patterns and drones with musical intelligence. Op 31 No 3 brought a welcome wit and light-footed buoyancy. By the time Dong turned to Op 110 after the interval, the rain had relented. Before playing, she spoke briefly about the cycle as a journey through Beethoven’s life, contrasting the outward high spirits of Op 31 No 3, written around the time of the despair expressed in the Heiligenstadt Testament, with the inward world of the late A flat major Sonata. She recalled McDermott describing Beethoven as ‘an architect for humanity’, and her performance gave this idea substance. The recitative and *arioso* had gravity and feeling; the first fugue emerged with increasing purpose before the lament returned. In the second fugue, Dong’s power found its

SOPHIE ZHAI



ideal context, driving the music towards a blazing final ascent. Here, her musical ideas were matched by the technique to carry them through.

McDermott’s own recital with Yefim Bronfman showed another side of Bravo!’s piano culture: a chamber-music strand she has done much to elevate, extending to the Vilar Performing Arts Center in nearby Beaver Creek – part of the festival’s wider reach through the Vail Valley – and shaped by longstanding artistic partnerships. McDermott’s solo first half was the pianistic high point of my visit. Handel’s Keyboard Suite in D minor, HWV437, played on a Yamaha, already showed McDermott’s acute sense of colour and contrast, with subtle shifts of shading giving its dances distinctive character. She continued *attacca* into Brahms’s *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, so that the Baroque source seemed to pass across two centuries before the audience could reset its ears. In the Brahms, that gift for characterisation endowed each variation with a unique personality, sustaining a theatrical vividness throughout. The final variation drove thrillingly into the fugue, where McDermott kept the multiplying strands clear while

steadily enlarging the scale; by the final pages, the piano seemed to have acquired orchestral dimensions without sacrificing definition.

Bronfman joined McDermott in the second half for Brahms’s F minor Sonata for two pianos, Op 34*b*. Their Yamaha and Steinway blended remarkably well, while the two-piano texture and the contrast between their pianistic personalities cast this well-known music in a fresh light. If some densely worked passages in the outer movements had a slight looseness of ensemble, the performance retained the spontaneity of two old friends responding to each other in the moment.

And what a striking friendship: it came into still sharper focus in Mozart’s E flat major Concerto for two pianos, K365,

on the second programme of the New York Philharmonic’s six-concert residency, with Elim Chan conducting the opening two programmes. Bronfman took the *primo* part and McDermott the *secondo*, yet the distinction between Steinway and Yamaha almost disappeared: at moments they were so seamlessly matched that you could imagine a single player moving between the two keyboards. Chan, conducting with her hands, kept the orchestra light on its feet and gave Mozart’s eloquent woodwinds room to answer them. The Rondo had irresistible spring, its rapid interplay seeming second nature to the two pianists. ‘Joy’ has long been one of McDermott’s watchwords for Bravo! Vail, and this performance was the perfect embodiment of that.

THOMAS MAY

NEW YORK

DiMenna Center, Mary Flagler Cary Hall
Yi-Chung Huang 12 July

Shortly after his February performance of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’s *Opus archimagicum*, a six-hour work of

immense difficulty, Yi-Chung Huang announced an even more ambitious project: Sorabji’s *Symphonic Variations*. This 693-page work lasting approximately seven and a half hours is, according to Huang himself, considerably more technically and mentally demanding than *Opus archimagicum*. He learned the score in just 130 days, giving its world premiere on 4 July in Montesilvano, Italy, and the American premiere eight days later at New York’s DiMenna Center.

Composed in the mid-1930s, the *Symphonic Variations* consists of a theme followed by 81 variations divided into three volumes of 27. The title hardly prepares one for the scale on which Sorabji conceives the variation form. Individual variations encompass a chorale prelude, waltz, nocturne, quasi-Indian raga, an enormous passacaglia comprising 100 transformations, and a five-voice triple fugue before the work withdraws into a final Epilogue.

As in *Opus archimagicum*, Huang approached Sorabji not as a technical feat but as music of atmosphere, colour and extraordinarily elaborate voicing. He repeatedly brought individual strands into focus without sacrificing the larger sonority. The densely written climaxes were played with gripping power, while Sorabji’s more luxuriant writing unfolded with a remarkable range of timbre and expressive rubato. As the hours passed and the challenges intensified, there was little sense of physical or mental fatigue, though one could see the immense concentration evident on his face.

Among the most memorable episodes was Variation 24, *Quasi valse*, which to these ears appeared to quote a fragment from Leopold Godowsky’s *Symphonic Metamorphoses on Themes from Die Fledermaus*. Variation 27, *The Garden of Iram*, evoked the perfumed, suspended atmosphere of Sorabji’s great nocturnes, while the *Quasi rāg indiana* of Variation 34 provided another striking change of character.

The Passacaglia of Variation 54 with its 100 transformations could easily stand on its own as a massive and intensely demanding work. Here one could see the Herculean effort required to keep the passacaglia theme audible as the surrounding texture grew ever more

complex. Variation 80, the enormous triple fugue, serves as the work's contrapuntal culmination. Few pianists, if any, could rival Huang's ability to bring clarity to Sorabji's extraordinarily dense polyphony.

Simply completing the *Symphonic Variations* in public constitutes an extraordinary feat, but Huang accomplished something far greater. Over its immense duration, he took his audience on a fantastical, varied and quite astonishing musical journey.

FARHAN MALIK

LONDON

Wigmore Hall

Stephen Hough 19 May

Alexandre Kantorow 28 May

Yunchan Lim 29 May

Igor Levit 1 June

Celebrating its 125th anniversary, Wigmore Hall and its ebullient director John Gilhooly are having a great year: their May festival showcasing great talent went predictably big on pianists, gathering three of the world's young meteors in just a few days.

First up was Alexandre Kantorow, with a programme led by Liszt's massive *Variationen über das Motiv von Bach*, S180, to which he brought a darkly heroic magnificence. Then came Medtner's Sonata in F minor, Op 5 – an over-strenuous piece of late Romanticism – followed by a beautifully poised rendition of Chopin's Prelude in C sharp minor, Op 45. An extraordinary study by Anders Hillborg entitled *The Kalamazoo Flow*, suggestive of Ligeti on speed, brought to an end this odd assortment, making way for the main event, which was Beethoven's final piano sonata, Op 111.

In the Beethoven, Kantorow's introduction was loud and emotionally over the top, and he made it clear he wasn't going to obey stuffy old conventions like bar lines. But the passion animating his account of the first movement felt absolutely real; there was a great deal of thunder and many sudden silences, and I found myself mentally cheering him on. The second movement was no less

revelatory, but here it was of Beethoven the visionary. In Kantorow's hands the leisurely unfolding variations developed an ecstatic momentum, suggesting the cosmic moral striving by which Beethoven believed mankind should live. The gentle discords of the bass line hummed, while the right hand threw curtains of trills heavenwards; the music became both ever simpler and ever more emotionally charged, right up until its extraordinarily throwaway final bar. A heartfelt performance of Liszt's arrangement of Wagner's *Liebestod* made a perfect encore.

Like Kantorow, Yunchan Lim is still in the process of honing his fabulous talent. He's a master colourist, and has made brilliant work of Chopin's *Études*, Bach's *Goldbergs* and Liszt's *Transcendental Études*. And at the Wigmore his performance of Scriabin's Piano Sonatas Nos 2, 3, and 4 ably traced that composer's evolving modernist technique. But late Schubert is for Lim a new departure, and as he demonstrated with the D major Sonata, D850, it's a welcome one. Schubert was in remission from his illness and happily holidaying with friends when he wrote this work, and it is powered by a sense of optimism. Lim attacked the opening movement with verve, generating a big, warm sound in a heartfelt *Con moto*. And he let the last two movements breathe gracefully, as Schubert's gentle pursuit of recurrent ideas took him repeatedly over the same emotional ground.

The other figure in this remarkable mini-galaxy was Igor Levit, who did service in a chamber concert plus a solo recital containing two relative rarities, the first of which was Ravel's 'Kaddish' from *Deux Mélodies hébraïques*. This Jewish prayer for the dead works best when its austere melody is played on the violin with piano accompaniment, but Levit used Siloti's arrangement for solo piano, most of which consists of a savagely unadorned melodic line. But its last section, in which it acquires harmonised colouring, was appropriately moving. Levit's other little-

heard offering was Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata, Op 61, whose pervasive sadness is thought to reflect the composer's grief over the death of his teacher Leonid Nikolayev. When he lifts himself out of his depression, it's to serenade his audience with brightly coloured defiance, a job that Levit took to with alacrity, relishing the 'wrong note' chordal passages and the dramatic alternation of effects. The recital ended with an incisive account of Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante*. No encore, just a few shamefaced little bows, and the residue in the mind of a profoundly enigmatic recital.

Gilhooly had a home-grown answer to all this brilliance: Stephen Hough, with a typically left-field box of tricks representing the art of the short character piece. This form was taken by the scruff of its neck by Schumann and Brahms, flourished in 19th-century middle-class America, and was subjected to miniature experiments by Schoenberg and Stockhausen, not forgetting Beethoven's blink-and-you'll-miss-it Bagatelle, Op 119 No 10, which prompted mirth throughout the hall, including from Hough himself.

Hough also gave a full-blooded account of Schumann's *Carnaval*, Op 9, after pointing out in a programme note that although this is a collection of disparate pieces, those pieces keep cross-referring, with each needing support from the others. Hough ended his inventive programme with his own *Mary Poppins Suite*, three whimsical, all-American arrangements that he'd originally written for Lang Lang's Disney project in 2021.

Amid all this cumulatively cross-referenced fun, Hough also managed to fit in Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata. Which was absolutely stunning: its first movement powered by molten excitement, its *Adagio* so mysterious, and its *Prestissimo* finale going like the wind. Hough's brilliant sound control allowed the contours of this great work to emerge with total clarity.

MICHAEL CHURCH