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SWISS MOVEMENT

Making music at the sunny
Verbier Festival Amateur Chamber
Music Week proves a pure joy



AT VERBIER: Badke Quartet onstage, top;
enthusiasts in rehearsal

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Every summer, the picturesque Swiss Alpine town of Verbier transforms itself from a premier destination for skiers to a premier destination for music lovers. For 22 days, such world-class musicians as Joshua Bell, Maxim Vengerov, and Mischa Maisky play in solo and chamber-music recitals, or join the Festival Orchestra in concert in this small, remote village (pop. 3,000; elev. 4,921 ft.). Verbier Festival performances take place in churches, chalets, and a 1,600-seat tent, the Salle Médran, located right under a gondola lift. What's unusual is that the superstars don't come with prepared programs that they might be playing on tour. Instead, performers and repertory are put together just for the festival.

While many are acquainted with the impressive professional lineup at this 15-year-old festival, few know about the recently initiated Verbier Amateur Chamber Music Week. ➔

Christian Thompson, a former IMG artist manager in London, who now runs the Amateur Week program as well as several other key parts of the festival, recalls its genesis: "Martin [Engström, the festival's founder] and I were having lunch in July 2005 on the day after the festival. We were thinking of ways to make even more of our performing-arts community and how to widen the [group of] people who participate."

With advice and support from Amateur Chamber Music Players, an international network of musicians, the first week was inaugurated in 2006.

Like the professionals, the participants at the Amateur Week are matched with repertory and other players (although there were some pre-formed groups). Each participant is in two groups, one that rehearses in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The morning and afternoon sessions are each divided into two 75-minute sessions, with coaching in one of the two sessions.

As an avid amateur violist, I decided to attend this past summer. My assignments were Dvořák's String Quartet in F, Op. 96, "American"; and Brahms' Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Op. 60. Rehearsals took place in venues across town, from an elementary school to restaurants normally closed in the summer. The dark, cave-like interior of an empty restaurant was the fitting location for one of our first rehearsals of the Brahms. "Did you know that Brahms told his publisher that the front of the sheet music for this piece ought to show a drawing of him holding a gun to his head?" coach Paul Coker asked us. The bleak atmosphere of the piece is set from the first powerful chord from the piano, followed by the almost numb phrases from the strings. Soon another piano chord leads into wild despair. Our task was to conjure up this gloomy mood and give a shape to Brahms's anguish.

Coker, a British-born pianist who's lived in Switzerland for 20 years, was one of a crack team of coaches on hand that included members of the Badke Quartet, a UK-based ensemble led by American violinist Heather Badke; Gábor Takács-Nagy, violinist, conductor, and a founder of the Takács Quartet, who now leads the Mikrokosmos Quartet; and Roderick Swanston, an English musicologist.

When not wrestling with Brahms' dark work, I was playing Dvořák's sunny "American" Quartet along with three talented teens from Hong Kong. They weren't the only young people in our program. Seven students from Swiss conservatories were mixed in with the 40 or so amateurs, while another batch of talented young professionals, all members of the Verbier Academy, joined us for one evening's free-play session.

Young musicians from all over the world are an important part of the festival. First, there's the Verbier Academy, which provides master classes and performance opportunities. Then there's the Festival Orchestra led by James Levine and coached by principal players of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

For the amateurs, the week's activities also included recitals by Coker and the Badke Quartet, a group dinner, and a free afternoon for hiking in the mountains (the sunniest day of the week, happily).

The Amateur Week was very international, with players from Canada, the UK, Switzerland, Germany, Colombia, Hong Kong, and France, as well as a large contingent from the Netherlands. Yet the lingua franca at the workshop is English. In the town, I found that basic French phrases helped, though many locals, such as the friendly staff at the Hotel de Verbier in the center of town, have good English. (Participants mostly stayed in hotels or B&Bs, or rented chalets by the week.)

A few other practicalities: the nearest airport to Verbier is Geneva. We flew from London on the budget EasyJet airline. We had a seat for my husband's cello and it was well cared for; another participant who checked his cello (on another airline) was less fortunate and his cello arrived a day late—with a snapped bridge.

From Geneva, it's a lovely train ride around Lake Geneva to Martigny or Le Châble, and then a short taxi or bus ride up the mountain. Distances aren't great within Verbier itself, but you won't forget that it is on the side of a mountain as you haul your instrument from place to place. All that walking made me feel less guilty about all the cheese I was eating, that's for sure!

Verbier has many fine restaurants—Italian, French, traditional Swiss—yet odds are that you will find yourself at some point at Harold's, an upscale fast food/Internet cafe run by an expatriate Englishman. We found ourselves there one night with a Swiss clarinetist, with whom we spent a happy few hours comparing notes on life in the United States and Europe. This is part of the appeal of Amateur Week: the chance to mingle with fellow players at lunch (everyone eats lunch together), in the cafés and bars, and in the free-play sessions.

It's fair to say that none of us amateurs, in our end-of-the-week concert, reached the heights of a Bell or a Maisky. Yet with our love for music, sometimes we achieved amazing things. As Gábor Takács-Nagy reminded us more than once, "The goal of playing is to make music, not to play the right notes." □