

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

ARIANE TODES is used to a relaxed atmosphere in her amateur chamber music making. So how did she face the challenge of a week's intense coaching at the Verbier Festival's new summer course?

It's been a while since I have rehearsed as part of a chamber group. These days my amateur idyll consists of a few quartets with friends after work, punctuated by food, wine and good conversation. So with enthusiasm but not a little trepidation I head for the mountains, to the inaugural Amateur Chamber Music Course in Verbier, which is to be coached by the UK's youthful Badke Quartet. With a suitcase full of chamber music and an hour-by-hour timetable for the following week, I make a 3am start to Switzerland.

JULY 14 The train journey from Geneva to Martigny shows Switzerland in all its clichéd glory: green grass and snow-capped mountains. On the vertiginous taxi ride from Martigny into the pretty, wooden-chalet-filled town of Verbier my left ear pops. I dump my stuff in the hotel and head to the introductory lunch in the garden of Chez Martin, whose delicious three-course meals are to be our daily staple. There is an incredible mix of ages and nationalities. Christian Thompson, the affable Englishman who directs the course, gives us a

rundown of the format of the week, including the concept of 'Freeplay', the informal evening chamber music that we must sign up to every lunchtime. It's a bit daunting being surrounded by so many new people, like my first week at university.

My first rehearsal is at 3pm. The cellist of the original line-up has dropped out, so until a replacement is found, our coach for the session, the Badke's cellist, Jonathan Byers, joins us in Martinů's Oboe Quartet, providing advice and support from the chair. I play badly, and it's a relief that we only run sections of the work. I haven't practised enough so there are passages I can't play, and I find the piece hard to fathom.

In the evening everyone meets up to watch the Badkes perform Mozart in the leather-sofa-clad lounge of the Hotel Farinet, where many of the events, musical and alcoholic, take place. There's a cosy atmosphere and the quartet performs very nicely.

At the end we receive our Freeplay assignments, but my group falls through as someone has misclassified Mozart's 'Kegelstatt' as being for violin, instead of viola, but I remain at the school and despite my tiredness I do my first quality practice in ages: maybe the thought of a morning rehearsal on the Martinů is helping,

A cable-car ride leads to a bizarre but beautiful concert setting



MARK SHAPIRO/VERBIER FESTIVAL AND ACADEMY

and this has to be one of the loveliest views I've ever practised to. Afterwards I meet some of the others in the Farinet bar.

JULY 15 The 9.30 rehearsal is in Chalet Adrienne, a posh hotel at the top of a steep incline a bracing 15-minute climb from the centre of Verbier. My right ear pops. Still catching my breath, I'm shown into the rehearsal room and go out on to the balcony to meet another spectacular sun-drenched view. As I drink a coffee and wait for the others, I think to myself, 'This is the life.' The rehearsal goes much better than yesterday's – last night's practice has helped and the things we discussed yesterday have stuck. We have two sessions with Jonny, focusing on the second movement, and start to understand some of the character of the music. But I'm used to jamming through Brahms and Beethoven so am finding it strenuous, especially with the complexity of the Martinů, and I end up saying 'sorry' a lot. I can play the notes as I've practised; or in a newly requested way; or rhythmically accurately; or with reference to a particular instrument. But I find it hard to synthesise all of these into a perfect whole.

The afternoon rehearsal is at the school. The cello seat has been filled by Marie-Stéphanie Janacek, a cellist from the festival's Rising Stars programme, who is fresh from playing chamber music with Joshua Bell. We are coached by Matthew Jones, the Badke's violist, who takes phrases apart to find out what everyone is doing. We run through the first movement for him and by the end of the session there's a sense that we're listening to each other and playing together. For Freeplay, I get to play through the Brahms and Schumann piano quintets and it's a relief not to have to be self-critical.

JULY 16 I wake up early for a group outing to the top of the Savoleyres mountain. As the cable car ascends, the view becomes ever more magnificent. We climb towards a grass knoll at which we are treated to a concert by the brass players of the UBS Verbier Festival Orchestra. This must be the most bizarre but beautiful concert setting I've ever experienced. Then we start



the long trek down on foot. As we wait for a coach to pick us up at the bottom of the mountain, I talk to some of the players I haven't yet had a chance to meet. A Dutch cellist tells me that the brain can do up to five things at once. I do the maths of chamber music: left hand; right hand; intonation; counting; reading. No wonder I'm having problems with everything else.

At 3pm we have a rehearsal with Badke second violinist Emma Parker. We work in detail on three sections, building them up part by part to work out balance and articulation. For the next session the group is on its own and we try to work at this level. For the first time, tensions arise as people start to exert their wills. There are differences of opinion and backs start to go up. I'm wary of commenting so I suggest different ways of practising and blame myself as a diversionary tactic. I have forgotten to sign up to Freeplay at lunchtime, but secretly relish an early night.

JULY 17 When I wake up I am delighted to find that my glute muscles are sore from yesterday's walk and Verbier's various inclines. There is an Alexander Technique demonstration at 9am. We are taken through the basics and the teacher talks about sitting bones and atlas joints, exaggerating a 'lazy' posture that is as nearly as bad as mine. I realign myself.

The 11.30 rehearsal is at Chalet Adrienne with Heather Badke. She is very positive and we work on a few selected bits. By now we are used to getting a different type of advice from each coach and adapting to it. We're still not quite listening to each other, but there is a sense that the piece is starting to flow better and we resolve some of the artistic differences.

My Schumann Piano Quintet group is due to have its first rehearsal after lunch and I realise with some apprehension that the second violinist is an eight-year-old American girl. She started the violin three years ago and has never played any chamber music. But she concentrates very well over the two-hour rehearsal, although towards the end she starts swinging her legs and asking the time. We decide to focus our attentions on the first movement.

Later, pianist Paul Coker performs a concert of one-handed piano music in one of the classrooms, which is a strangely subversive and intimate place for a concert. Then everyone piles into a local restaurant for fondue, followed by a specially organised classical music quiz that quickly descends into anarchy. ▶



Everyone joins together in the evening for fondue at a local restaurant

LUCY BLAKESON

MATTHEW JONES



An impromptu late-night performance of Dvořák provides some light relief



The finished product: final performances of Martinů's Oboe Quartet (above) and Schumann's Piano Quintet (below)

JULY 18

Our first Schumann coaching session is with Emma, who breaks sections down and builds them up again, giving us some useful individual coaching along the way. Pianist Roderick Swanston comes to the next session and focuses on the harmonies of the movement. His coaching gives our playing a lot of energy, while Emma has improved our control.

At lunch a buzz goes round that Maxim Vengerov has arrived. In the afternoon I have an individual Alexander Technique session — a wonderful half-hour on the bench being stretched and manipulated to have two inches added to my neck and my flat feet compensated for. Unfortunately I'm carrying a borrowed viola as well as a violin and after the ten-minute uphill walk home I'm nearly back to square one. I do a couple of hours' practice and run through a Mozart piano trio for Freeplay. After Schumann and Martinů, the phrasing and purity of Mozart seems particularly difficult, but I feel as though my palette has been cleansed.

JULY 19

We rehearse the Schumann in Verbier's small Protestant church, which has a horrible, boomy acoustic. The run-through isn't very good — I'm feeling information overload. But Matt gives us some good ideas and we are able to give the piece more of a joyful feeling. After lunch we have coaching with Paul, who concentrates on the piano part. We perform the movement straight through and it doesn't sound too bad — it certainly has energy and is fairly together. But I'm still feeling the frustration of not being as good as I want to be, in what is one of my favourite pieces. I come to the conclusion that it's a lot worse not to find what you want than not to want it in the first place, which is my usual amateur's privilege.

In the evening Ilya Gringolts's group the Phaedrus Quartet performs Mendelssohn's Quartet op.14 and we see in action everything that we've been looking for: range, blend, communication. Next, in public conversation with course director Christian, Hilary Hahn talks about her experiences. She remembers her time at Marlboro, where various coaches would tell her different things until her head was swimming, but she says that the effects would sink in two weeks later. It's good to know I'm not the only one who has felt confused, and I wonder what I'll be doing in two weeks' time.

For Freeplay, three young professionals from the Verbier Academy have been drafted in to play a Brahms sextet with a few of us, somewhat reluctantly, it seems. But we give them a run for their money and by the end they seem quite impressed that people who don't do it for a living can be any good. I feel a small sense of pride.

An extra-keen group of us gather at the Farinet for a late-night candlelit and beer-fuelled performance of the Dvořák Piano Quintet. It's sheer joy and I have to accept my shallowness as a musician in enjoying the instant hit and adrenaline rush of running through

such an incredible work to the slog and psychological conflict of working on it. We get kicked out at 11pm as hotel residents are trying to sleep.

JULY 20

As usual at around this time on courses, with only a day to go, pre-emptive nostalgia is setting in and I start to feel a surge of affection towards the people I've been sharing my life with so intensely for the last few days, even the ones I don't know very well. Every second takes on special value. I watch some of the masterclasses given by Franz Helmerson and Boris Kuschnir, part of the main festival that is gearing up. Then it's up the hill for a run-through before this afternoon's final performances.

The atmosphere in the concert is very special, as it often is in amateur concerts. Intonation may not be pure or ensemble perfect, but there is a joy and a conquering of adversity that makes it more emotionally intense than the average professional performance. The standard varies from a professional-sounding Mendelssohn Piano Trio and a marketer's dream of a quartet of young brothers from Scotland to some slightly more ropey groups. But every performance receives a wave of warmth and support from the audience, including the beaming coaches, and it's lovely to hear the people I have got to know but not heard before and to correlate their personalities with their playing.

I don't feel nervous for the Martinů but this is a bad sign, and I don't play very well. I'm trying to do all the things we've discussed, but in the end the work takes on its own life and what we lack in precision we make up for with energy. It turns out that Ilya Gringolts has been in the audience, and I'm glad I didn't know this beforehand. Later on, the Schumann goes with vim, and although it feels like all our coaching has gone out of the window, we get good feedback.

A few of us go for a last supper at a local burger bar before meeting up with everyone in the local Taratata Club to listen to French chansons. The depressing nature of the music doesn't capture the atmosphere but the club soon turns into a disco, which is more in keeping. People gradually say their goodbyes and I'm one of the last to leave, at two in the morning. On the way back to the hotel I see Vengerov heading home and give him a wave.

JULY 21

I have an early start to catch the train home. It's been a fantastic week, filled with wonderful music, new friendships and a lovely

atmosphere. And it's given me the best of both worlds: a chance to work towards chamber music perfection for a limited period only, safe in the knowledge that my life doesn't depend on it. As the taxi drives me back down the hill, my glutes may be firmer than when I arrived, but my resolve not to cry is weakening. ■



Next year's course runs 13–20 July.
See www.verbierfestival.com