



Hall ears

Switzerland's range of alpine resorts boasting cultural offerings has grown by one, but how will the latest compete? **Charlotte Gardner** reports from Andermatt

Inside Andermatt's new hall

When much of the talk over London's proposed new concert hall has been centred not so much on what it will look and sound like, but where it will be, the new concert hall which opened in Andermatt this past June is a rather fascinating alternative model: on the one hand, a painstakingly designed 650-seat space by Studio Seilen Architects led by Christina Seilen, with acoustics by the team behind the Philharmonie de Paris, and an inaugural concert played by none other than the Berliner Philharmoniker; but on the other hand, situated in a village a great many people would be hard pushed to point to on a map.

If that includes you, then Andermatt is an alpine sports resort set bang in the centre of Switzerland in the canton of Uri, and the reason why it hasn't previously been high on British radars

is because for decades its chief function was as an army garrison. Dramatic downscaling of the Swiss armed forces in 1995 and 2004 left Andermatt's economy so decimated that in 2005 the Swiss government invited in successful Egyptian developer Samih Sawiris to advise them on how to resurrect the village as a tourist destination; and when Sawiris informed them that he couldn't pull it off on their proposed budget, they instead allowed him to purchase approximately one million square metres to do it for himself. The result is the creation of what is intended to feel like a luxury year-round multi-sports destination to rival the likes of Gstaad and Verbier: six new four- and five-star hotels, 42 apartment buildings, 28 plots of land for the construction of private chalets (and the government has made Andermatt exempt from the Swiss Second Home Law which restricts construction of second homes), and an

18-hole golf course. Plus, the first major purpose-built concert hall in any alpine ski village, because music-loving Sawiris also wants to rival Switzerland's established upmarket resorts on cultural grounds. 'I was convinced that in Andermatt we could do it much better [than destinations such as Verbier],' he says. 'There is certainly no other mountain resort that boasts a world-class venue good enough to attract the Berliner Philharmoniker.'

One suspects that the Verbier Festival might pick some holes in that pronouncement, but needless to say it was an intrigued bunch of architecture, lifestyle, and music journalists who were flown out for that headline-grabbing opening concert, preceded by a tour of the resort and its facilities; and the weekend certainly gave us much to think about.

To deal with the hall first, Cristina Seilen has worked a miracle on what was a site replete with limitations. While it's now being proclaimed as the resort's 'crown jewel', it was in fact such a late addition that when the commission landed on Seilen's desk, the designated site was a 2,000m³ underground space already under construction and intended as a conference room. Furthermore, she was given just 18 months to deliver. 'The first case we had to make was for the volume of the room,' she remembers. 'Specifically

the ceiling height, because its six metres was problematic for a proper concert hall. So in order to convince Samih of that, I asked him to join me for a concert at Berlin's Pierre Boulez Saal: a space whose plan is more or less the same as Andermatt, but with a ceiling height of around 13.5 metres; and when you go into a hall and feel the music around you, you suddenly start to understand what volume does to vibration.' Her case made, Seilen established that the already-agreed plan allowed for the roof to extend above ground, which she did in glass, suspending sculptural acoustic reflectors from the ceiling for maximum visual impact. Back down below, that glass also makes the hall feel more spacious than it is, bringing in the mountains and sky whilst flooding the hall with natural light.

Adding a 'backpack' to the hall's underground space then increased audience capacity without meddling with the already-completed foundations, and the result is an doubling of the original room volume to 5,640 cubic metres, capable of seating 450 for a large orchestra and 650 for smaller ensembles, and with retractable ground floor seating to also allow for standing audiences and catered events. Further internal acoustical elements meanwhile come via side balconies, the ceiling's multi-height origami configuration with acoustically transparent walls allowing for further reverberation. Plus, because the hall still struggles with large orchestras, there's also an electro-acoustic system which increases the reverberation time by milliseconds, to give the impression that the space is a little bigger.

So that's the official speak. Now on to the punter's-eye reality, and from the outside the hall looks much smaller and more squished between two hotels than it does on the architectural drawings. However, if you do happen to walk beside it and peer down through the glass, you have the unusual treat of being able to see what's happening onstage. Furthermore, it doesn't feel small from the inside, and although certain aspects of the finishings lend it more the feel of posh school theatre than luxurious concert venue, the geometry of that origami wooden ceiling is striking and beautiful, and it's equally an unusual and enjoyable novelty to sit in a concert hall whilst gazing up at the sky and mountains.

“Aspects of the finishings lend it the feel of posh school theatre”

As for how the acoustics have worked out in practice, the inaugural concert demonstrated that, even with the electro-acoustic system and a programme chosen with the hall size in mind, large orchestras will need to be careful, because the 45-strong Berlin Philharmonic's opening Mozart Symphony No 34 almost blasted us off our chairs. That said, they adjusted accordingly, and the concluding Jupiter Symphony was a much more comfortable listen. Plus, it's a very attractive sound: warm and clear, but not so unforgiving as to give the musicians nowhere to hide. It will happily accommodate a chamber orchestra, and be an intimate and supportive environment for chamber music – which in reality is all that it needs to be, because whilst the Berliners made for a high-impact opening, an orchestra of their size and stature playing to 450 seats isn't a remotely feasible ongoing business model. Or indeed a necessary one, as the programming going forward demonstrates.


This programming is headlined by three seasonal festivals: a three-performance autumn 2019 satellite from the Lucerne Festival to include Daniel Harding conducting the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, then in January 2020 a four-day Beethoven-themed Winter Festival starring Daniel Barenboim, both of which come courtesy of Sawiris' own pre-existing musical links. By contrast, summer 2020 is a multi-genre

offering delivered by Florence's New Generation Festival (NGF): a festival which presents opera from singers at the starts of their careers in the grounds of the Palazzo Corsini al Prato, but which is as much known for its wild after-parties featuring DJs and drag acts.

And here we come to the surprising part of the Andermatt musical story, because it's the trio of British 20-somethings behind the New Generation Festival – Maximilian Fane, Roger

Granville and Frankie Parham – who have been hired to manage what will be known as Andermatt Music. No doubt Sawiris has his eye on the 48 per cent of tickets they sold to wealthy party-loving under-35s in Florence last year, but it's nevertheless interesting that it's this team, rather than one with clear high-level classical programming credentials, who will be running the show in what is an exceptionally musically discriminating country.

In fact, away from the music, the architectural and lifestyle journalists were also looking perplexed as they wandered around Andermatt, remarking on the strange and not always attractive hotchpotch of architectural styles, on impracticalities in the layouts of the penthouse apartments, and questioning whether the resort's flagship five-star hotel had the right brand of luxuriousness. Indeed, the feeling was that Andermatt would be for people who want to feel as though they're living the luxe resort experience, but who don't have the means to do so in Gstaad and Verbier.

Back to the music, though, and it would be wrong to be negative. Working in the NGF team's favour is that the heavyweight classical partnerships have already been made for them. Furthermore, they're clearly fast and adaptable learners who know how to make the right contacts themselves; and indeed the final aspect of the Andermatt musical programming, which does come from them, is monthly recitals from serious classical young artists, who come through further Italian connections. So, whilst it remains to be seen whether Andermatt as a whole package ends up hitting the original five-star sports and cultural destination, clearly it's going to be something. Not least because it has a very nice concert hall. 

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