

Sonatas on the ski slopes

What made Daniel Barenboim haul his piano to a remote mountain village in the depths of winter? **Simon Mundy** reports from Andermatt Winter Festival, held at a new concert hall high in the Swiss Alps



By the time you reach Andermatt from Zurich you know the Swiss railway system very well. A few express trains take you as far as the nearby village of Göschenen in under two hours, but many rail journeys require two or three changes with a journey time up to four hours. You pass through a series of industrial suburbs until, after Erstfeld, it is clear the mountains are getting higher and the line no longer has an easy route to follow as it heads into the heart of the Swiss Alps. The valleys narrow and the towns become fewer, with less of the brutal architecture of the last century. In mid-January the snowline was shifting around the thousand metre mark. At each change of station more people carrying skis cluttered the carriages. At Göschenen, the train to Milan is no longer fit for the climb and you change for the 10-minute hoist onto the slow little wagons of the Matterhorn-Gotthard line, taking on gradients that are better suited to

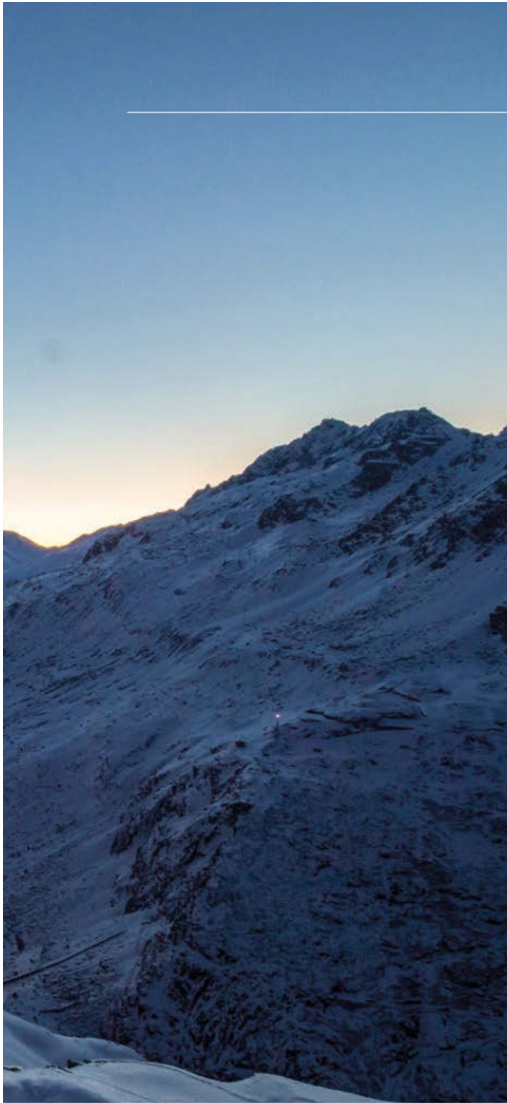
a cable car before they emerge from tunnels alongside an ice-filled Alpine stream.

Andermatt is something of a shock. Somewhere behind the small, windswept station there is a traditional Swiss village with sloping chalet roofs and curly Gothic shop signs; on the other side, beyond icy car parks, is the new face of this region: the valley is dominated by a clump of modern apartment buildings and a wood-faced square block which is a Radisson hotel. This once sleepy backwater is developing rapidly into a haven for ski enthusiasts, mountaineers and trekkers; but along with the resorts offering winter sports facilities, some heavy-duty cultural infrastructure is also part of the investment. Underground, with balcony-level glass that looks only at the wheels of passing cars and the first-floor windows of guests changing out of their sporting gear, is the new, state-of-the-art Andermatt Concert Hall.

Until 10 years ago, the development site was a grim army base guarding the bunkers

burrowed out of the mountains around the St Gotthard pass. There are still soldiers around but it is said the bunkers now contain the huge computer servers of the Swiss banks, generating enough heat to power the resort that a piano-loving Egyptian multi-millionaire has poured his money into. All of which makes the concert hall both incongruous and rather wonderful in its eccentricity.

And there was Daniel Barenboim playing Beethoven sonatas, having had his own piano lugged, *Fitzcarraldo*-like, from Berlin. These days he is as much an educator as interpreter. His programme of four sonatas (Nos 15, 3, 24 and 30), was a chronological guided tour but in each he had one thing he wanted us to realise: that Beethoven's slow movements were revolutionary; that Beethoven was the first composer to bring the intensity to the piano that Handel and Mozart had brought to their most beautiful arias. Barenboim did not skittle through the outer, faster, movements but



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there was a playfulness to them, and they were as often rattled through with a grin as with any show of virtuosity.

In Op 109 in E major, the Adagio section of the first movement and the Andante cantabile of the third movement variations were spellbinding; Barenboim achieving that extraordinary feat of making time stand still without losing the momentum of the music. For the 600 people in the subterranean hall, the recital had been built brilliantly, culminating in a reading of true greatness before he let us out into the frozen night with some generous but irrelevant encores.

The festival and the hall's general season are programmed by a young British team, led by Maximilian Fane, which also runs the New Generation Opera Festival and workshops at the Palazzo Corsini in Florence. Over the season they have put together a series of recitals featuring young soloists in three venues in Andermatt, meaning that the festival is just one

of the highpoints of the resort's musical offering. Having Barenboim playing in such intimate surroundings was something of a coup but there was a return to more normal – and sadly less illustrious – fare during the following days.

Inviting conductor Jonathan Brett to revive his English Classical Players after a decade to be the accompanying orchestra was a curatorial mistake. Even with many distinguished and experienced musicians in its ranks, the orchestra found it hard to form a unified ensemble, relying on the leader and timpanist rather than the conductor to keep things together. It would have taken a more imaginative pianist than Yoon-Kee Kim to rise above the fray in Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 3. Her performance was regulation and professorial; but we had been shown how the music should be revealed, not only two nights earlier by Barenboim but also that Friday lunchtime by the Russian pairing of violinist Nikita Borisov-Glebsky and pianist Georgy

Spellbinding: Daniel Barenboim (top) performs Beethoven in Andermatt Concert Hall (above)

Tchaidze. Borisov-Glebsky is an exceptional player with immaculate intonation – but the accompanying Tchaidze was a real discovery for me. Their ensemble was everything the orchestra's was not: crisp, attentive and perfectly together, while Tchaidze's steel fingers made their performance of Beethoven's Sonata in A major Op 47 truly monumental.

If Andermatt's Maecenas, Samih Sawiris, sustains his interest and continues to support the music significantly, the festival could in time become an attractive adjunct to the January shenanigans at Davos, over the mountains. It will need a better prepared resident chamber orchestra and higher calibre conductors but, for a first event, this was a worthwhile experiment with unusual and rewarding results. **IP** andermttmusic.com