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A classics feast in France

The Times' cartoonist crosses the Channel to find a flourishing chamber music festival in an abbey in northern France



Bach pianist Angela Hewitt. Illustration: Peter Brookes

Peter Brookes

If you have just endured the virtual hell of being trapped for six hours in the August heat of the Channel Tunnel because of power failure, then the eventual sight of the Abbaye de Valloires must be the next best thing to heaven.

A frantic forty five minute drive down from Calais, a quick freshen up at our hotel then a final sprint across glorious rolling countryside bathed in golden evening light, and we made the Festival's opening concert with just ten minutes to spare.

You don't have to be religious (I'm not) for this majestic example of high French Baroque, and the prospect of great music there, to make your frazzled spirits soar.

I had first been attracted to the idea of Valloires, in Argoules, northern France, when I caught sight of the stunning line up in a leaflet distributed by the Wigmore Hall.

It was world class and I had never even heard of it. If a festival only in it's second year can attract musicians of the calibre of Angela Hewitt, Nicholas Angelich, Imogen Cooper, Maciej Pikulski, Daniel Muller-Schott, Alina Ibragimova; the Takacs, Jerusalem and Ebene Quartets; and singers Dame Felicity Lott, Ailish Tynan and Mark Padmore, then it must be seriously good.

The Festival takes the work of a core composer, in this case Beethoven, and places it alongside one from the 20th century, here Shostakovitch (this year it will be Schubert with Britten.)

Add plenty more to the mix (Bach, Bartok, Ravel, Schumann etc. etc.) and this is Michelin-starred stuff, a *menu degustation* of thirteen concerts in six days. That several top flight performers from the inaugural season wished to come back to serve up second helpings in 2007 could only be a good sign.

Something else intrigued me. Here was an international chamber music festival directed in France by an Englishman. Adam Gatehouse is BBC Radio 3's Editor of Live Music, having worked there first as a producer and later executive producer working with the leading orchestral and opera performers and conductors of the day.

He instigated the celebrated BBC Wigmore Hall Lunchtime Concerts, as well as founding and continuing to run Radio 3's New Generation Artists Scheme. Connected or what?

He has a home in La France Profonde and had harboured the dream of a chamber music festival for 15

years before stumbling upon the perfect place for it in northern France, rather than the sun soaked south where he expected to find an eventual berth.

Perfect it certainly is. Valloires is the only complete 18th century Cistercian abbey in France. It's church is ideal for concerts, with a warm acoustic, and plenty to hold your gaze: the gilded papier-mache angels hanging from the ceiling from which the eucharist is suspended in a dove, the massive carved baroque organ chest, the elaborate filigree wrought iron screens. But do take advantage of the cushions available at the door. Churches don't do comfort.

The abbey itself, which functions as a home for children and the elderly for the rest of the year, conveniently houses the performers on-site. It is an article of faith with Adam Gatehouse that the artistes should be comfortable and well fed and watered, with good rehearsal facilities as well as space for masterclasses (which you can attend).

There can be few more peaceful settings for musicians to enjoy while they work, the abbey overlooking magnificent formal gardens with over 4,000 varieties of rare shrubs and roses.

Which is all equally pleasant for the audience, too, and one of the days allowed for a picnic in the grounds catered for by the festival between concerts. The garden also has a decent restaurant serving highly recommendable (by me) Normandy cider.

Hotels and B&B's are plentiful locally for audiences but as with any rural festival anything close to the venue is swiftly fully booked. The festival won't book for you, but it does provide a comprehensive list of recommended places to stay and eat [on it's website](#).

The Gatehouse principle is a winning one. He wanted a truly international event, in beautiful surroundings, for an international audience and Valloires is almost equi-distant from Paris, London, Brussels and Amsterdam.

He is also committed to putting together established world class performers and young emerging talent. Ailish Tynan singing to Imogen Cooper's playing, or Angela Hewitt's piano complementing Daniel Muller-Schott's cello achieves exactly that.

When youth alone is given it's head the results can be electrifying, as when the Jerusalem and Ebene Quartets combined in the even younger Mendlessohn's Octet.

It's ridiculous to think he was only 16 when he composed it. But what topped even that for me was the chance to draw Angela Hewitt, the Bach pianist, elegant in black and silver as she rehearsed the 48 Preludes and Fugues. You feel pretty privileged being an audience of one.

But don't feel excluded, as you too can meet and wine and dine with the performers at the post concert suppers held in the two dining rooms (one magnificently vaulted) next to the Abbey cloisters.

They are popular, with a real buzz when the stars of the evening make their entrance and have their practical side, too; finding places to eat late in the country can be tricky. Our final supper was sheer delight, with the Gatehouse family cheered to the echo for the success of the past week and for the promise of a third festival in 2008.

Other summer festivals I regularly visit each have their own unique character: Aldeburgh with its fine maltings concert hall at Snape set in the atmospheric reed beds of Britten country; the sprawling Edinburgh International Festival whose fringe frequently upstages the official event; the fledgling North Norfolk Music Festival housed in characterful local churches.

But none can approach the intimacy of Valloires, which is the essence of the chamber music performed there. You live it and breathe it.

There is, of course, more to life than music alone, and the Picardy region has plenty to offer besides. It is a short drive to the Bay of the Somme where the bird life and the haunting marshes remind me very much of North Norfolk. They even serve samphire, a kind of salt marsh seaweed popular in Norfolk, in the many seafood restaurants.

There seems to be one of on every corner (and several in between) in the small towns such as Saint-Valerie-sur-Somme, and nothing tacky about any of them, giving you a hard choice for your pre-concert lunch.

The very name Somme of course has hellish resonances and should you wish to visit, the main British memorial of 1914-1918 at Thiepval with its imposing Lutyens arch, or the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Peronne are within easy reach. It has to be one of life's cruel ironies that this landscape that has echoed to the awful din of war, now plays host to the opposite extreme in the sublime combination of music and peace which is Valloires.

Among the treats this summer are Ian Bostridge, Julius Drake, Paul Lewis, Cedric Tiberghien and the Belcea Quartet. Oh, and Mark Padmore, Alina Ibragimova and Imogen Cooper are returning. Me too. Heaven, indeed.

NEED TO KNOW

The Festival de Valloires is being staged this year from August 8-13. A full schedule of concerts, which this year is focussed on Schubert and Benjamin Britten, is available on the [festival website](#).

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