

Between Intimacy and Scale at the Verbier Festival

Across four days in the Swiss Alps, recitals, artistic partnerships and orchestral encounters moved between the exposed concentration of the Église and the collective force of Salle des Combins.

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Read: [Between intimacy and scale: four days at the Verbier Festival 2026](#)*



Hikers follow an Alpine trail towards a mountain hut near Mont Fort above Verbier, Switzerland, July 2026.
Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Verbier is difficult to separate from its altitude. The village spreads across the Valais slopes beneath ridges and high meadows visible from the festival venues. Above, a trail crosses towards a solitary mountain hut; below, music enters the village through a temporary stage at Médran, posters beside the Église and the white structures of Salle des Combins.



Verbier spreads across the surrounding Alpine slopes in Valais, Switzerland, July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Verbier's geography shapes the practical rhythm of the festival. Audiences move between steep streets, buses, mountain transport and venues that impose different listening conditions. The Église de Verbier concentrates attention at close range; Salle des Combins opens the field to larger forces and wider sightlines. Moving between them changes not only scale but the way relationships between musicians can be perceived.



A string trio performs on a temporary outdoor stage near Médran in Verbier, Switzerland, July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Across four days near the close of the Verbier Festival's 33rd edition, the programme moved from solo recital and melodrama to two-piano partnership, chamber orchestra and the full Verbier Festival Orchestra. The most revealing contrasts, however, were not simply between small and large ensembles. They appeared in the ways authority was exercised: through control without display, leadership that passed between collaborators, conducting shaped by economy or physical immersion, and soloists whose individuality sometimes stood apart from the orchestra and sometimes merged with it.



Festivalgoers walk beside Salle des Combins during the Verbier Festival in Verbier, Switzerland, July 2026.
Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Before the concerts began, two talks at the Pavillon des Combins introduced different sides of the festival. On 27 July, Martin Engstroem and representatives from Shenzhen announced the continuation of a three-year partnership between the Verbier Festival and the Chinese city, extending the collaboration through 2028. The partnership pointed beyond the immediate programme towards the festival's expanding international network. Its importance was institutional rather than musical, but it provided relevant context for the days ahead.



Martin Engstroem and representatives from Shenzhen mark the continuation of the Verbier Festival's three-year partnership with the Chinese city, at the Pavillon des Combins on 27 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Later that afternoon, Gianandrea Noseda spoke with Julian Sykes about Mahler's Sixth Symphony, the Verbier Festival Orchestra and his long relationship with Verbier. He rejected reducing the symphony to the familiar label *Tragic*. Describing Mahler's Fifth as horizontal, the Sixth as vertical and the Seventh as spiral, he presented the Sixth as a work in which tensions accumulate and collide rather than proceed along a single continuous course. That distinction would become useful three evenings later, when blocks of orchestral sound gathered weight, gestures changed abruptly and the score placed severe physical demands on the players.



Gianandrea Noseda speaks with moderator Julian Sykes during a Verbier Festival talk at the Pavillon des Combins in Verbier, Switzerland, on 27 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Together, the talks framed the festival at two levels: the continuation of the three-year partnership with Shenzhen pointed towards the festival's expanding international reach, while Noseda's discussion focused on the close examination of a score and the discipline required to realise it with a young orchestra.



Verbier Festival posters and programme notices are displayed beside the Mass schedule at the Église de Verbier in Verbier, Switzerland, July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Exposure and Partnership

At the Église de Verbier, the festival enters the daily life of a working village church. Posters and programmes sit beside the Mass schedule, while inside performers are only a short distance from the audience. In that compact space, pauses, changes of expression and restrained gestures are easy to register, and silence can carry nearly as much weight as sound.



Bruce Liu acknowledges the audience after his recital at the Église de Verbier on 28 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Bruce Liu opened the concert sequence on 28 July with a programme extending from Ligeti and Bach to Beethoven, Chopin, Ravel, Mompou, Albéniz and Liszt. Despite its breadth, the recital did not feel fragmented. Liu moved quickly between playfulness, melancholy, force and withdrawal without treating each change as a separate effect. His technical command gave those shifts clarity, but the larger impression was one of concentration rather than display.

Liu's economy suited the Église. In such a close space, even a slight exaggeration would have been obvious. Liu could become sharply animated when the rhythm or texture demanded it, then settle back almost immediately. The church was full, and his repeated returns during the applause showed the strength of the audience's response, although his manner remained composed throughout.



Thomas Quasthoff and Kirill Gerstein acknowledge one another and the audience after their performance at the Église de Verbier on 28 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Later that afternoon, Thomas Quasthoff and Kirill Gerstein changed the character of the day with Viktor Ullmann's *The Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke*. Quasthoff remained seated and read the German text with gravity, but without theatrical excess. Gerstein's piano was an equal dramatic voice: it could support the narration, interrupt it or continue alone after Quasthoff had fallen silent.

The relationship depended on exact timing. Quasthoff moved between urgency, irony, tenderness and reserve, while Gerstein sometimes remained beneath the words and sometimes took over from them. The audience hesitated more than once before applauding because the endings did not provide the familiar cues of a recital. The final silence belonged to both performers.

This differed from the shifting leadership that would follow between Kissin and Schiff. Quasthoff and Gerstein were not competing for prominence. Ullmann's work depended on alternation—one yielding while the other entered—and on what accumulated in the pauses between voice and piano.



A technician checks the two grand pianos on the empty stage at Salle des Combins before Evgeny Kissin and András Schiff's recital on 28 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

That evening, Salle des Combins shifted the terms of collaboration again. With two grand pianos onstage, Evgeny Kissin and András Schiff occupied the larger hall in sharply contrasting ways. Kissin projected greater force and outward expression; Schiff appeared more contained and structurally focused. The contrast was clear, but it did not settle into a fixed opposition. Their roles changed with the repertoire.



Evgeny Kissin and András Schiff acknowledge the audience after their recital at Salle des Combins on 28 July 2026.
Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

In Mozart, Kissin often set the direction while Schiff supported and stabilised it. After they changed positions for Schumann, Schiff assumed a more prominent role. That shift continued in the second half, particularly in Smetana and Dvořák, where Schiff increasingly shaped the structure while Kissin supplied weight and intensity. Their coordination was clearest in exchanged looks, precisely judged entries and the small adjustments of timing through which each responded to the other.



Evgeny Kissin and András Schiff stand together during the final applause after their recital at Salle des Combins on 28 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

What made the collaboration persuasive was adjustment rather than complete agreement. Each pianist retained a distinct character, but both were willing to yield or assume leadership as the programme changed. The two-piano works kept them physically and musically separate, while the pieces for piano four hands required much closer coordination. After several encores and sustained applause, the evening was memorable less for the pairing of two celebrated soloists than for the care with which they responded to one another.



Salle des Combins illuminated against the Alpine landscape after the evening recital at the Verbier Festival on 28 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Outside, Salle des Combins stood illuminated against the darkening mountains. With the audience gone, the temporary venue had returned to silence.



The ticket desk at Salle des Combins, with a display marking the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra's twentieth anniversary, on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

An Orchestra and Its Memory

The following evening, the focus returned to Salle des Combins and to an ensemble with a history of its own. The Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra was celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2026, a milestone reflected in the display beside the ticket desk. Under Mikhaïl Pletnev, the orchestra appeared with Dmitry Shishkin and Daniel Lozakovich.



The Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra acknowledges the audience at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026.
Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

The orchestra established its own presence before attention moved to the soloists. In Czerny's Symphony No. 6 in G minor, the VFCO combined youthful energy with considerable discipline, moving from smooth momentum and playful articulation towards passages of greater force.

Its responsiveness was especially clear in relation to Mikhail Pletnev. His conducting depended less on expansive movement than on timing, precision and close attention to individual sections. A pointed gesture, a sudden lift of the left hand or a brief indication towards one part of the orchestra could redirect the ensemble immediately.



Mikhail Pletnev acknowledges the concertmaster of the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra during the applause at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

During the applause, Pletnev turned first towards the concertmaster before acknowledging other musicians and sections of the orchestra. The sequence placed the ensemble at the centre of the acknowledgement, extending the collegial emphasis already apparent in his conducting.



Mikhaïl Pletnev raises both hands while acknowledging the audience with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.



Dmitry Shishkin and Mikhaïl Pletnev acknowledge the audience with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra after a performance of Pletnev's orchestral arrangement of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Dmitry Shishkin was the first soloist, playing Pletnev's orchestral arrangement of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*. He played with refinement and became more animated as the work developed, but the balance between piano and orchestra was not always ideal. At several points, the orchestral sound became too strong and reduced the clarity of the solo line.

The imbalance was not constant. Shishkin clearly led some passages, while in others he waited for the orchestra or entered into a more equal exchange with it. The difficulty came less from his playing than from an arrangement that expanded Schubert's concentrated piano writing into a broader symphonic texture.

His solo encore revealed a different side of him. Without the orchestra, the atmosphere became more intimate and his inward manner registered more clearly. The contrast suggested that his individual voice was better served by the smaller scale of the encore than by the orchestral arrangement.



Dmitry Shishkin acknowledges the audience beside the piano, with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra applauding, at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.



Daniel Lozakovich and Mikhail Pletnev raise their joined hands while acknowledging the audience with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Daniel Lozakovich approached Pletnev's arrangement of Schumann's Violin Concerto on different terms. He began in a controlled, inward manner and allowed the intensity to build gradually. His gestures remained contained, but the violin gained greater emotional prominence as the work progressed.

The orchestral texture accommodated the violin more successfully than it had the piano in the earlier *Wanderer Fantasy*, although the solo line occasionally blended so closely with the VFCO that it lost definition. That was not always a weakness. Schumann does not consistently oppose a heroic soloist to an accompanying ensemble, and Lozakovich's contained manner suited passages in which the violin seemed to emerge from within the orchestral texture rather than stand apart from it.



Daniel Lozakovich acknowledges the audience with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra after his performance at Salle des Combins on 29 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Lozakovich was most compelling when that inwardness gave way to greater urgency. The finale brought a clearer sense of release, while his solo encore returned to a more solitary and sombre atmosphere. Because the intensity had developed gradually, these changes carried greater weight.

The closing acknowledgements made the evening's musical roles visible. Pletnev presented individual musicians and sections of the orchestra; Shishkin stood beside the conductor, piano and ensemble; Lozakovich and Pletnev raised their joined hands before the standing VFCO.

Across the programme, Pletnev moved between the roles of conductor, arranger and mediator between soloist and orchestra. Yet the evening's focus was broader than any one musician. Shishkin and Lozakovich each had to preserve a distinct voice within Pletnev's orchestral arrangements, while the VFCO remained a musical presence in its own right.

From Solitary Intensity to Collective Force

On the morning of 30 July, Alexandre Kantorow brought the focus back to the Église with the most physically absorbed solo recital of the four days. His programme—Bach in Liszt's transcription, Medtner, Chopin, Alkan, Scriabin and Beethoven—moved across very different forms of virtuosity, yet never felt like a display of range. The recital was held together by sustained concentration and a clear emotional progression from one work to the next.

That absorption was visible at close range. Kantorow often played with his head lowered and his hair falling across his face; at moments, tension appeared in small tremors or in gestures that continued after a phrase had ended. But he was not in constant motion. Much of the recital's force came from the way contained passages suddenly opened into release.

During the first half, darkness and urgency repeatedly gave way to greater clarity. He could increase the pressure of a phrase rapidly, then reduce the sound and withdraw into a quieter register. After the interval, the contrasts became sharper: mourning gave way to hope, rhythmic drive to suspended stillness, and concentrated weight to playfulness. These transitions felt integral to the programme rather than presented as separate effects.

At times, the sustained pressure risked becoming too continuous. Kantorow restored proportion by drawing back and allowing slower phrases to settle. Moments of hesitation and quiet made the later returns of force more telling.

The Église was full, and the applause was among the strongest I heard at the festival. Kantorow returned several times before offering an encore. During the bows, he repeatedly placed a hand on his chest—a simple gesture that read as a direct acknowledgement of the audience's response.



Alexandre Kantorow places a hand on his chest while acknowledging the audience after his recital at the Église de Verbier on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.



Alexandre Kantorow acknowledges the audience during the applause after his recital at the Église de Verbier on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

That evening at Salle des Combins, the Verbier Festival Orchestra was introduced through the nationalities of its 99 musicians. Drawn from twenty-six countries, groups of players stood in turn as each country was named. The brief ceremony made visible the orchestra's international composition before those varied backgrounds were brought together in a single ensemble.



The Verbier Festival Orchestra during a pre-concert presentation in which its members were introduced by nationality at Salle des Combins on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Mikhaïl Pletnev then returned in a different role, as soloist in his orchestration of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2. At the piano, he remained inward and attentive, often listening closely during orchestral passages rather than seeking continuous visual prominence.



Mikhail Pletnev acknowledges the audience beside the grand piano after Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 at Salle des Combins on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Pletnev's economy of movement made changes in energy more conspicuous. The performance was most convincing in the dialogue between piano and orchestra. His orchestration gave Chopin's concerto a fuller, more symphonic sound without obscuring the solo line, and the VFO supported him without overpowering the piano.



Mikhail Pletnev and Gianandrea Noseda raise their joined hands while acknowledging the audience with the Verbier Festival Orchestra after Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 at Salle des Combins on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

The finale brought the concerto's lightest and most playful release. Its brighter character did not erase the introspection of the earlier movements, but allowed Pletnev's refinement to sound less guarded. Noseda kept the accompaniment responsive and flexible, leaving the piano room to retain its distinct character.

The final bow brought their contrasting stage manners into view. Pletnev's reserve beside the piano differed from Noseda's more expansive presence. When they raised their joined hands before the standing orchestra, soloist, conductor and ensemble were briefly presented together.

After the interval, Mahler's Sixth Symphony put Nosedá's earlier description of its architecture as vertical into practice. Blocks of sound accumulated, gestures changed abruptly and climaxes rose through the orchestra rather than advancing along a single continuous line.



Gianandrea Nosedá acknowledges sections of the Verbier Festival Orchestra during the final applause after Mahler's Sixth Symphony at Salle des Combins on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.

Nosedá did not conduct as though demonstrating the score from outside. He appeared immersed in its tensions. His gestures changed with the music: sharply directive in the march and climactic passages, restrained when the sound narrowed, and more fluid during passages of continuous movement.

His abrupt left-hand lifts were especially distinctive. They could redirect the ensemble with little warning, while broader gestures opened the sound across the orchestra. The contrast between these compressed signals and his more expansive movements gave visible form to the symphony's unstable balance between control and eruption.

The VFO answered Nosedá with discipline and force. The opening march had a hard edge, while the darker and more playful material of the Scherzo carried a different tension. Softer passages sharpened the later returns of weight. The three hammer blows emerged from this cumulative pressure rather than as isolated theatrical effects.

Yet the performance was not defined by weight alone. Nosedá was equally attentive to transitions into stillness, to passages in which the orchestral sound thinned, and to moments when sadness or hesitation interrupted the forward drive. The finale drew these contrasts into a prolonged struggle between momentum and collapse.

The standing ovation followed the most expansive performance of the four days, yet Mahler did not erase the intimacy of what had come before. The attentiveness heard in the smaller settings remained essential even within the full weight of the orchestra.

From the Alpine slopes near Mont Fort to the final applause in Salle des Combins, the festival moved repeatedly between solitude and community. Its most revealing moments came when those states met: when private concentration became visible, when authority was shared, and when collective power depended on individual attention.



Gianandrea Nosedá stands before the full Verbier Festival Orchestra during the final applause after Mahler's Sixth Symphony at Salle des Combins on 30 July 2026. Photograph: Diana Nikolova.