



Mountain music

Pianist Princess Caroline Murat, founder and artistic director of the Gstaad New Year Festival, talks to Teresa Levonian Cole about her passion for helping young musicians



Caroline Haffner has just returned to Venice after playing concerts in Lausanne and Rome, to find the waters of the Grand Canal trespassing in her palazzo. 'I am so sorry,' she says in perfect, French-accented English. 'There has been a flood while I was away, and I have to deal with it. Could we possibly speak in a little while?'

A few hours later, everything is under control. One would expect no less from the descendent of one of Napoleon's greatest generals, who was to become King of Naples, and of his wife, Caroline Bonaparte, who busied herself restoring the San Carlo Opera House while her spouse waged war. Caroline Haffner is, in fact, the *nom de guerre* of Princess Caroline Murat: pianist, festival director and dedicated charity fund-raiser.

At the age of five, Murat's exceptional talent led to lessons with the legendary pianist, Alfred Cortot. 'I was his last student,' she says. 'He was an old man by then, and I remember his huge, knobbly hands, and how he would shout and scream. It was quite scary for a child.' She laughs. After two years, she was sent to a less irascible teacher and went on to win numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the Concours de Genève.

Yet she was never touched by the professional ambition that characterises the music business today. 'My only concern,' she says, 'was to be a good and honest musician.' And so, in between her own busy concert schedule which takes her from Spain to Thailand, Poland to Kazakhstan, Murat dedicates herself to the Gstaad New Year Festival, of which she is founder, president and artistic director. Now in its fifth year, and in sharp contrast to the high-profile festivals of, say, nearby Lucerne and Verbier, you will not find starry names jumping off the pages of its glossy programme. The policy is quite deliberate. 'Everywhere you go,' she says, 'you hear the same artists, again and again. If you don't fit the required formula or don't have the right agent, you don't stand a chance. Talent is no longer nurtured in today's business-driven world.'

Inspired by the legacy of Yehudi Menuhin in Gstaad, Murat established the festival to redress the situation: to provide a platform for exceptional young



ABOVE: the Church at Rougemont is a popular venue for Gstaad Music Festival events.

ABOVE RIGHT: Princess Caroline Murat at the opening of the 2010 festival

artists at the start of their careers, as well as for more established talents who are not necessarily household names. 'I know all the professors, so am in touch with what is going on,' she continues, 'and I am very proud to have been able to raise the funds to send young musicians to study abroad with the best teachers, and help them on their way.'

Among the performers at this year's festival are two of her protégés, both of whom she pointed in the professorial direction of Dimitri Bashkirov in Madrid: 16-year-old Georgian pianist Ana Kipiani and 25-year-old David Kadouch, already launched on a promising career. The winners of the 2010 Menuhin Junior Competition, and of Warsaw's prestigious International Chopin Competition, are also among the guest performers, as is the young Israeli soprano, Chen Reiss, who is currently taking the opera world by storm.

'It is an intimate affair,' she says of her festival. Concerts take place in small halls and churches across

Gstaad, Rougemont and Lauenen, as well as in the wood-panelled salon of Gstaad's Grand Hotel Park, which has wonderful acoustics. Only some 1,500 tickets are sold over the 10-day period and, through her connections, Caroline Murat secures sponsors who, attracted by the glamorous crowd that congregates annually at the ski resort, play a vital role in the success of the festival. 'It has an air of exclusivity, although everyone is welcome. And with the various cocktail receptions and gala dinner, we all have a lot of fun!'

Once the New Year celebrations are over, what do the next 12 months hold in store? '2011 is the bicentenary of the birth of Franz Liszt, so I shall be brushing up on my repertoire,' says Murat. 'Liszt celebrated his 50th birthday at the Villa Medici in Rome, so I am delighted to be giving a recital of his music there, in September.' And, of course, she will continue in her tireless role as godmother to young musicians, seeking out and supporting talent, wherever it may blossom.

The Fifth New Year Music Festival in Gstaad, Lauenen and Rougemont takes place from 28 December to 8 January 2011. Tickets: +41 (0)77 474 1527, gstaadnymf@gmail.com, www.apmcmusique.com

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