

# Musical Journeys

Eilat

Beirut

Røros

## Hide n chamber

Behind unassuming doors, **James Inverne** takes his seat for a festival of unconventional charm



On song: Yizhar Karshon and Claire Meghnagi

### Eilat

Israel and Israelis have always been big on classical music. The saying that Israelis would rather go without lunch than lose their concert tickets obviously doesn't apply to the entire population but there is a sizeable hard core of dedicated music lovers, and the last decade has seen a blossoming in the Israeli music festivals circuit. Where once there were a few, now there are many. To add to stalwarts like the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival and the vocal festival in the Arab village of Abu Ghosh there are a host of newcomers – among them the Israeli Opera's annual arena-style residency by Mount Masada, Valery Gergiev's Classics at the Red Sea Festival in Eilat and, not to be confused with the latter, the Eilat Chamber Music Festival.

The last of these – this year welcoming Paul McCreech and the Gabrieli Consort, Chloë Hanslip, Maxim Rysanov and Pieter Wispelwey – seems almost incongruous in the Las Vegas-on-sea that Eilat has become. After all, one hardly expects to find a concert of Reger and Ligeti within a hundred miles of a themed hotel entitled Herod's Palace. But then, this year's concert venue is unconventional in itself.

One entered through what looks like a pretty modest cinema multiplex foyer, the scent of warm popcorn in one's nostrils. Yet beyond the food counter, through an innocuous-looking pair of double doors that gave no hint of the jaw-dropping surprise they hid, was a fully fledged concert hall of plush red velvet and some considerable size.

Once over my surprise at the stage boxes and delicate chandeliers, I settled down for cellist Pieter Wispelwey and pianist Paolo Giacometti's concert. Mainly Wispelwey's show, he was at his intelligent best in Bach's Cello Suite No 6, variously long-breathed, urgent, even vertiginous – but all melded together with a wondrous concentration of line. The next morning saw Chloë Hanslip's strobing violin-playing – rhythmic and intense – leading a fine account of Shostakovich's Piano Trio No 2. A traversal of Nino Rota's Fellini film

scores, colourfully played by the festival's student orchestra under the energetic baton of Gisele Ben-Dor, made for a fun late-nighter (only marred by some unfortunate, but actually quite funny, mis-cueing of the accompanying film footage).

Best of all, the Jewish festival of Purim was marked by an unusual celebration – a Venetian masque. A loose yet lovely narrative structure based around different kinds of love traversed traditional Venetian songs and works by Biagio Marini and Bernardo Storace alongside the expected Monteverdi and Vivaldi. A spirit of off-kilter fun pervaded the show, with humour in the shape of harpsichordist Yizhar Karshon ardently bursting into song (after a fashion) in Marini's *La vecchia innamorata* and soprano Yeela Avital's due-any-minute pregnancy amusingly worked into the various relationships depicted. But she and her fellow soprano Claire Meghnagi (dark, focused tone) found repose, languor and reflection aplenty. Top honours, though, go to Avi Avital's supple, thrusting mandolin-playing.

Sadly the concerts were not well attended, though it's not something that unduly worries the festival's general director, music scholar Leonid Rozenberg. "Every concert has to feel special," he says over a lunch at which he hasn't time to eat (the tall and thin Rozenberg seems not to worry about earthly matters like sustenance while he rushes around attending to pressing festival business). "I must do what I believe in rather than just big crowd-pleasers and the audiences who come know they get something unusual, and they know how to listen. It is nice to have a big audience but it is most important to have a good audience." He's right about the quality of punter – a man behind me one night knew Pieter Wispelwey's discography by heart, another engaged me in a detailed conversation about Ligeti, and the schoolchildren at the Venetian masque stayed awake and focused (sadly not always a given with this repertoire and that age group!). And after one concert, I was invited to a party at a place where one can swim with dolphins. You don't get that at Wigmore Hall. ☉