Lovely Lucerne is full of character

Drenched in history with world-class music and art to enjoy alongside splendid scenery, Jenny Woolf really couldn’t find anything to dislike about this Swiss city.

From somewhere near the night-time River Reuss, the booming tones of an old folk-tune arose. As I felt my way precariously down the steep, unlit alley, I almost tripped over the three alpenhorns stretching 10 feet or so across three adjoining steps. Well – if you don’t find alpenhorns in Switzerland, where else will they be? I was so impressed by the players, warmly dressed against the biting cold and collecting for charity, that I gave them a handful of francs for their box.

This glimpse of folkiness offered a pleasant contrast to the elegance, serenity and style of Lucerne during its music festival. This famous event began over 70 years ago, when the conductor Arturo Toscanini organised a week of music in the gardens of Richard Wagner’s villa near the town. Ironically, considering Wagner’s anti-Semitic reputation, Toscanini aimed to create a festival free of the Nazism which had already polluted festivals in Germany. This famous event began over 70 years ago, when the conductor Arturo Toscanini organised a week of music in the gardens of Richard Wagner’s villa near the town. Typically, considering Wagner’s anti-Semitic reputation, Toscanini aimed to create a festival free of the Nazism which had already polluted festivals in Germany. This famous event began over 70 years ago, when the conductor Arturo Toscanini organised a week of music in the gardens of Richard Wagner’s villa near the town. Typically, considering Wagner’s anti-Semitic reputation, Toscanini aimed to create a festival free of the Nazism which had already polluted festivals in Germany. This festival is attended by the continent’s best musicians, and programmes are designed to promote up-and-coming talent, from the Italian pianist Andrea Battistini to the Swiss conductor Alexanderending.

Our hotel, the Wilden Mann, was one of the oldest in the town, very near to the river in a narrow old street, and about 10 minutes walk from the concert hall. With rambling corridors and oddly-shaped rooms, and various antiques decorating its corridors, it dates from the 16th Century, and was named after the mythological wild men who crop up throughout all Switzerland. This famous event began over 70 years ago, when the conductor Arturo Toscanini organised a week of music in the gardens of Richard Wagner’s villa near the town. Typically, considering Wagner’s anti-Semitic reputation, Toscanini aimed to create a festival free of the Nazism which had already polluted festivals in Germany. This festival is attended by the continent’s best musicians, and programmes are designed to promote up-and-coming talent, from the Italian pianist Andrea Battistini to the Swiss conductor Alexanderending.

That impression was reinforced by some sightseeing. For centuries, Lucerne, its lakes and mountains have attracted tourists, but although there are now over a million visitors a year, it lacks any sign of tacky tourism, and the beauty of its setting can be appreciated at any time of year. In winter, with changeable weather, the lake was all pale blues, silky greys and fluttering whites, and the panorama of mountains surrounding the city were partially covered in snow and constantly changing mists.

The 14th Century Kapellbrücke (“Chapel Bridge”) is Europe’s oldest covered bridge and one of Switzerland’s most photographed monuments. It had many intricate 17th Century paintings in the eaves, which remained in place till some careless person dropped a cigarette in 1993 – sadly much of the present bridge is an accurate reproduction, but it is still worth seeing.

Many of the town’s houses have elaborately decorated facades, some modern, some more than 150 years old. The most famous are probably the neo-Gothic Dornach House, whose specially curved windows prevent outsiders from looking in, and the “Balances” hotel, both of which are by the Mannerist painter and teacher Seraphin Weingartner. But perhaps the artist who should be most closely associated with Lucerne is Picasso. Thanks to the father-and-daughter team of Siegfried and Angela Rosengart, Lucerne’s visitors can see an extraordinary and little-known collection of his work. The Rosengarts were art dealers who knew Picasso, and their fascinating collection, housed in a converted bank in Pilatusstrasse, contains around a hundred of his works, including many large paintings, rarely reproduced or seen abroad. A display of D.D. Duncan’s intimate photographs of Picasso helps illuminate the artist’s personal life and put the displayed works into context, and there are also 125 Klee watercolours as well as works by Renoir, Seurat, Braque and their contemporaries.

World-class music, world-class art, splendid scenery, charming little hotels – what more could one ask? Well, possibly a few serious flaws, so I could have a little grumble, as I love to do. But on that point, Lucerne disappointed me. Narrowly avoiding tripping over an alpenhorn really was the worst thing that happened. It was just great, and I can’t wait to go back.