

Out of Hours

'You can hear the girls declare ...':

the price of culture

Aneurin Bevan, architect of the NHS, famously liked to dine in the best restaurants. Accused of being a champagne socialist, or Bollinger Bolshevik, he replied:

'Anyone can live like a millionaire for 5 minutes.'

Nicola Benedetti, the Scottish violinist, plays a Stradivarius violin worth over £6 million. It was lent to her by the millionaire banker Jonathan Moulds, the European President of Bank of America, on the condition that she plays for him and his friends a few times a year.

Two or three times a year, for a much smaller price, I also have this experience, sitting in the front row of one of Glasgow's concert halls. Although not the best place to sit to listen to an orchestra, and correspondingly the seats are not that expensive, it is the best place to observe a soloist perform. To see Benedetti, a few yards away, disappearing into her mental cocoon and to listen to the sound that comes out, is one of the most sensational experiences that can be had in a concert hall.

For people in the UK, it is all but impossible to book tickets online for the Berlin Philharmonic. But if you turn up at the box office 24 hours before a performance, about 200 tickets are available for sale. You will sit on a wooden bench at the back of the stage. My wife and I sat in the front row, 2 feet from the percussion section and about 30 feet from Sir Simon Rattle. As the trumpet called out the funereal note at the start of Mahler's 5th Symphony, we were swept away in a sea of sound. If you have started the day with breakfast on the roof of the Reichstag (online booking, avoiding the queues, fast-tracking security), so much the better.

For the last 10 years or so, I have taken my family to the Christmas Eve performance in Glasgow's Theatre Royal by Scottish Ballet. Booking a year ahead, it is possible to get front row seats. Compared with many types of public entertainment, such as the global superstars lining up to play the 12 000-seater new SSE Hydro in Glasgow, it is not expensive. The Russian tsars sitting in the royal box at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg did not have better seats. Sitting 8 feet above an orchestra in full swing, as it plays Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, or

Humperdinck, while watching the spectacle of movement and colour on stage, is quite the best way we have found to leave the cares of the old year behind and to start preparing for the holiday ahead.

Several times a year we go to live cinema transmissions from the Metropolitan Opera at New York (www.metopera.org). For less

than a tenth of the price of a ticket at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, you can see and hear the best singers in the world, such as Anna Netrebko and Joyce DiDonato, and be home by 10 p.m. on a Saturday night. In the cinema, everyone has a front row seat. Instead of the fixed view, remote subtitles, and distance from the stage that characterises conventional visits to the opera, there are multiple views, close-ups, large subtitles, and backstage interviews. For people with partial sight, the experience is transformed. The repertoire is conventional, but there is a reason why some operas are more popular than others. Production values are sky high. The plots are often thin, implausible, indeed unnecessary, but the formula is the same. It was said of Maria Callas that any decent soprano can make audiences cry in Act 3. She could do it in Act 2. Even if you don't like opera, live cinema transmission is worth trying.

For non-millionaires, there are rich experiences to be had. But as the millionaire JP Morgan advised:

'... the outcome of any venture depends on preparations beforehand.'



Nicola Benedetti. Credit: Universal/Simon Fowler.

Graham Watt,

Norie Miller Professor of General Practice,
University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

E-mail: Graham.Watt@glasgow.ac.uk

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp14X681457

*'As I walk along the Bois Boolong
With an independent air
You can hear the girls declare
"He must be a Millionaire."
You can hear them sigh and wish to die,
You can see them wink the other eye
At the man who broke the bank at
Monte Carlo.'*

Music hall song by Fred Gilbert, 1892.