

Aldeburgh Festival - A classical treat if you pay enough

Members increasingly get first shout for tickets at events such as the Aldeburgh Festival. Join or prepare to queue for returns, says Jessica Duchen, although the organisations rely on public money

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The other day, public booking opened for this year's Aldeburgh Festival. Helen Hayes, who runs a recording studio at the nearby Potton Hall with her husband, dashed to her phone, hoping to book seats to take their small son to hear the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. It wasn't to be. "I've just tried to book for the CBSO Rattle concert and it is sold out – before public booking opens!" she declared on Facebook, adding: "Talk about access to music... and they get most of the public funding for music in this area. Elitist? Classical Music?"

So what happened? Well, Aldeburgh's Snape Maltings concert hall seats a modest 800. The 16,000-odd Friends of Aldeburgh Music receive priority booking. And everyone wants to hear Sir Simon Rattle in action.

Non-members can keep phoning the box office and hope for returns. The alternative is to become a Friend and receive priority booking. More and more arts organisations are starting up schemes like this. You pay an annual premium to be first in the queue, and you will probably be rewarded with a range of treats, newsletters, dress rehearsal tickets or meet-the-artists receptions. It's an excellent way for an organisation to reward their loyal followers, build income and create closer engagement. And the bigger the organisation, the more complex the structure of Friends membership.

Aldeburgh is relatively simple. You can pay £5 to join the e-mailing list, or £15 for snail-mail; either gives you a "brief opportunity to book tickets before they go on sale to the general public". Or you can become a Friend for £65 per annum, with access to a Friends priority booking period, plus regular newsletters and special events. Donate more than £100 and your name can be listed in the programme.

The Royal Opera House was running a Friends scheme long before Facebook's founder was born. There, you currently pay £79 per annum to be

a Friend, or a range of fees up to £1,680 per annum which makes you a Friend Premium Level 2. The Wigmore Hall – which has a Friends membership of some 25,000, while the hall seats fewer than 600 – will sign you up as a mailing-list member for £15 (again, some priority booking), a Friend for £35 or anything up to a Patron Friend for £500.

Public funding is so uncertain at present that about half the organisations who have applied for money from Arts Council England may be turned away; therefore we can probably expect annual premiums to rise. There's little alternative: with costs increasing and subsidy shrinking, venues must explore all possible avenues towards becoming more self-sufficient.

The question raised by Helen Hayes, though, is still about public access for public money. It's both the blessing and curse of the UK's "mixed model" of arts funding: private and public money rub shoulders in our cultural organisations' piggybanks, supporting everything from star performers' fees to education and outreach activities. Juggling different expectations and vested interests is a thorny task for those running the shows; they have to make them all things to all people.

Most are now heavily reliant on money from private sponsorship and, crucially, from fans. Christopher Millard, a spokesman for the Royal Opera House, points out: "The Friends represent our core audience and we value them tremendously." Similar sentiments emanate from John Gilhooly, artistic director of the Wigmore Hall: "If people are coming to 30 concerts a year, showing that level of engagement and loyalty, then of course we have a strong loyalty to them," he says.

The public money received is significant, but as a proportion of annual turnover it is shrinking. The Wigmore Hall received £360,000 this financial year, which goes towards 400 concerts and a programme of 385 education and outreach events; the hall itself raised more than £1m via donations, ticket sales (average price £14) and the Friends scheme.

According to Millard, of the ROH's turnover of £106m, this year £28m comes from ACE: "For every pound of state funding, we raise three ourselves," he says. Still, the ROH has more capacity than most to explore new ways to reach a wider public: big screens, cinema broadcasts, TV, radio, internet. The cinema broadcasts have been hugely successful.

But what about actually getting in to see a performance of the most oversubscribed shows – for instance, Plácido Domingo in Simon Boccanegra last year, or pretty much anything by Wagner? "We hold back 20 per cent of the seats for non-members," Millard confirms, "as well as 67 day seats for each performance."

At Aldeburgh, things are slightly different. "We used to hold back day seats," says Aldeburgh Music's chief executive, Jonathan Reekie. "But there's a big difference between a venue in a big city and one like ours in a rural area – day seats don't work when you're in the middle of nowhere." His advice to Hayes

is to be first in the queue on 28 May, "returns day" – a chance to buy returned tickets provided you turn up in person.

The Wigmore's sell-outs of big-name performers' recitals to Friends are rarer than they look. "We only had two concerts last year that sold out to members only, out of a programme of 400," says Gilhooly. "Even at Jonas Kaufmann's performance of *Die schöne Müllerin* last autumn, everyone in the lengthy returns queue was able to get in." For Aldeburgh, Reekie emphasises the cutting-edge, contemporary nature of most festival programming: "Very few of our events sell out to members only," he insists. "This particular CBSO concert is the exception rather than the rule."

But is there not a duty of access to a tax-paying public? Here's the twist: for that Simon Rattle concert, maybe not. The Aldeburgh Festival is one part of a year-round, principally educational programme for the umbrella Aldeburgh Music. "The bulk of Aldeburgh Music's public subsidy goes towards our educational initiatives," says Reekie. "The Festival takes relatively little. That CBSO concert is supported by corporate sponsors and the box office. It has no public subsidy at all."

So there we go. Most arts organisations take access extremely seriously and do all they can to increase it. But if public money is far exceeded by private, it can be no surprise if loyalties sometimes swing towards the donors. As subsidies reduce, this is bound to happen more often. Venues will build financial support from core audiences, which is fine. But for the casual visitor or first-time concert-goer, getting a ticket may grow more difficult. Stump up for membership, or get ready to queue.