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Opening extract from

The Look

Written by

Sophia Bennett

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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From the Chicken House

I have sisters. One sadly died, the other was my idea of a catwalk queen: sixties mini skirts, Mary Quant make-up and Biba accessories. I watched them live lives similar to the girls in this story of what *looks* good, how people judge *looks*, buy and sell *looks* and what really matters in the end.

The Look is brilliant, funny and moving, and I'll admit I did cry out loud in the end. I think this is Sophia Bennett's best book yet; take a *look*, I'm sure you'll agree!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

The Look

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Text © Sophia Bennett 2012
First published in Great Britain in 2012
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover design and interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-906427-91-7

To my brother Christopher, and Sarah.
And to my friend Rebecca K. You are *amazing*.

One

'busk: to perform music in the streets and other public places for money'

That's the official dictionary definition. I checked it on Dad's computer before we came out, while I was waiting for Ava to remember where she'd put her flute case. But there was another version underneath:

'busk it [informal]: to do something as well as you can, without much preparation'

That's the one we need, my sister and me. We aren't so much busking as busking *it.* And I have a feeling it shows.

'Are you sure this is working?' I mutter, as Ava puffs her way through the final chorus of 'Yellow Submarine'.

She finishes with a flourish and a smile.

'We're fabulous. Trust me.'

Trouble is, I don't. The last time I trusted my older sister was in primary school, when she assured me that it was perfectly normal to wear a Buzz Lightyear costume (complete with wings) to gym club if you accidentally left your leotard at your granny's. The teacher made me do the whole class in that costume, including the hula hoop sequence. Ava giggles whenever she thinks of it. Some memories haunt you to infinity and beyond.

However, she promised me a third of the proceeds today, which sounded tempting at the time. I was hoping to earn enough for some new shading pencils.

'Jesse's cousin got fifty pounds last week,' she says, reading my mind. Her eyes have the dreamy look she always gets when she mentions her boyfriend in Cornwall – or even, it seems, his relatives.

'What, Jesse's cousin, the classical violinist?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Who's in an orchestra?'

'Well, yes,' Ava admits. 'But she was busking in Truro, which is miles from anywhere. And look at us.'

I look at us. Location-wise, we're perfect: Carnaby Street, in the heart of London's West End, surrounded by Saturday shoppers taking advantage of some early summer sun. If we were Ava's boyfriend's cousin, we'd probably make a fortune. But I bet she wasn't playing 'Easy Beatles Tunes for Beginners'. And I bet she didn't give up her instrument at Grade 3, like Ava did two years ago. And I bet she wasn't accompanied by a girl who only took up the

tambourine that morning, like I did.

It. We are so busking *it.*

'I reckon we can make at least double what she did,' Ava says confidently. 'All those people have been stopping to look at us.'

'That might have something to do with that top you're wearing.'

'Why?' she says, looking down. 'What's the matter with it? It's a lot more interesting than your t-shirt.'

'Nothing's the matter with it,' I sigh.

Ava spent forty-five minutes this morning choosing the skimpy lilac top and cut-off jeans she's wearing now, and another twenty-five perfecting her makeup. She looks fantastic as always: glossy-haired and violet-eyed, curvy and sparkling – well, not quite as sparkling as usual due to her virus, but still super-hot. We must make an odd couple: the stylish sixth-former, looking like an undercover film star, and her gangly younger sister, looking like a lamppost in shorts.

I wish I could copy her, but I've tried and it doesn't work. I just don't have the required va-va-voom. When she bent down to pick up her flute she actually got a round of applause from a group of passing builders. As soon as she started on her version of 'Yellow Submarine' they moved on pretty quickly, though. It seems even builders have sensitive hearing.

'Anyway, how much have we made so far?' she asks, hopefully.

I check the open flute case at our feet.

'Two Starburst wrappers, a piece of chewing gum and a parking ticket.'

'Oh.'

'But there's a guy down the street who keeps staring at us. Over there, see? He might give us a pound or something if we're lucky.'

She sighs and looks tired for a moment. 'It's hardly enough for a ticket to Cornwall. I'm never going to see Jesse at this rate. Let's give them "Hey Jude". My last performance "had to be heard to be believed", remember?'

I grin. I do indeed remember that quote from the school newsletter last Christmas. I'm not sure they meant it the way she took it, though. I'm starting to understand why she couldn't con any of her friends into coming along today, before she asked me.

Ava does a couple of test breaths, then launches into the opening bars. I rattle my tambourine as best I can, trying not to catch the eye of anyone nearby. I think I'm supposed to 'take a sad song and make it better', but that's beyond my musical ability. I'll just have to settle for making it louder.

Meanwhile, the guy down the street is slowly heading in our direction. It suddenly occurs to me that he might be a plainclothes policeman, if plainclothes policemen wear leather jackets and carry orange backpacks. Maybe we're not allowed to play here and he's about to arrest us. Or worse, he could be a kidnapper, sussing out victims.

Thank goodness I did judo in my last year of primary. And for once, my height could be useful. While Ava got her film-star looks from Mum, I got all the genes from our tall, lanky dad, who's six foot five, even without the mad hair – which I also inherited, along with his bushy monobrow. I'm not Dad's height yet, but I'm definitely taller than leather jacket guy. I'm pretty sure I could take him on in single combat, if I had to. As long as he hadn't done judo too, of course.

When I look round, Ava's not there. Then I realise she's sitting down on the cobbled pavement, with her head between her knees.

'Are you OK?' I ask. She should definitely eat more breakfast.

'Yeah. Just needed a rest. "Hey Jude"'s a lot tougher than I remember. I finished ages ago, by the way. You've been rattling that tambourine by yourself for five minutes.'

'Oh, have I?' I bet she's exaggerating. I hope she's exaggerating. I stop rattling. 'I've been watching that guy over there. D'you think he's a policeman? What's that he's holding? Is it a walkie-talkie?'

Ava follows my gaze. 'No. I think it's a camera. Ooh! He might be a scout.' She gets up to have a better look.

'I don't think so,' I say. 'He's too old and he isn't wearing a woggle or anything.'

Ava rolls her eyes. 'I mean model scout, not Boy Scout, you idiot. Lily Cole got scouted round here.'

'Lily who?'

'Famous supermodel. Do you know *anything* about fashion, Ted?'

'Mum says "blue and green should never be seen", although I've always thought—'

She interrupts me by digging me in the ribs. 'Hey! He's coming over. Act natural.'

Oh, no. He *is* a policeman. I can just feel it. We're about to get a criminal record. At least, Ava is. I think I'm too young for one. Plus, her rendition of 'Hey Jude' was definitely more criminal than my tambourine playing.

'Hi, girls,' the man says, with a disarming grin. 'How are you today?'

'Fine,' Ava answers, coyly. She looks up at him through her long lashes, while I try to remember my defensive stance and blocking manoeuvres.

'My name's Simon and I'm from a model agency. D'you mind if I take a picture?'

'Oh, I don't think so,' Ava blushes. 'I'm not really—'

'I meant you, actually,' Simon says, gazing past her.

Ava's watching me now. Come to think of it, Simon's definitely looking in my direction. But that can't be right. I stare back at him, confused. He looks straight into my eyes and his grin widens to a dazzle.

'I've been watching you and you're amazing. Have you thought about modelling?'

What? Amazing? Me? *Modelling*? No.

Suddenly I feel dizzy. This must be some sort of prank. I assume we're being filmed. Is Ava in on it? She looks as bewildered as I feel. Why is Simon talking to the flat-chested freak with a monobrow, when the gorgeous one with the film-star face is standing right beside him?

He hasn't stopped staring at me. I guess I'm supposed to say something, but my mouth has dried up. I shake my head.

'You should consider it,' he goes on. He delves into the pocket of his trendy black jeans and hands me a card. It has a logo on it of a jagged black 'M' inside a pale blue circle. He says the name of the agency, but I don't catch it because my ears are buzzing. 'Look us up. How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?'

My mouth is still dry.

'Fifteen,' Ava tells him, less bewildered now and more suspicious. 'She's too young. Look, we've heard about people like you.'

He looks confused for a moment. 'Actually, she's not,' he says. 'Fifteen's great. Too young for catwalk, but we've got fourteen-year-olds on the books. Come and talk to us. Bring your parents. We're one big family. Picture?'

He holds up the camera again. It's larger than average: a Polaroid, designed to spit out instant snapshots. I wonder what they're like.

'No you can't,' Ava says firmly.

'Well, at least tell me your name,' he says to me, dazzling me with that smile again.

'Ted.' My voice is a croak. 'Ted Trout.'

'Trout? Seriously?'

I nod, but is anything serious round here? I'm still waiting for the camera crew to leap out from wherever they're hiding and fall about laughing.

'Nice meeting you,' he says. 'And think about it. Call us. You've got something.'

You've got to be kidding, he means. As he looks away, the spell is broken. There will be a comedy video of me on YouTube any day now: the human beanpole who thought she was Kate Moss. But by the time I've stopped feeling dizzy and the buzzing in my ears has faded, it's all over. Simon has disappeared into the crowd and if Ava wasn't standing there, staring at me like I'd just sprouted a second head, I would swear I'd just dreamt the whole thing.

As the shock fades, Ava dumps her flute and gives me a hug. 'Are you OK? Look, let's just give up and go home.'

I nod. I'm shaking. That whole experience was just too weird for me to handle.

'Do you think he said it for a joke? What did he expect me to do?'

'I think he was a scammer,' Ava says, staring angrily after him. 'There's a lot of them about. They'll go up to anyone and say you could be a model, then next thing you know they're charging you five hundred pounds for photographs. Then they disappear. It's fairly evil.'

'How do you *know* this stuff?'

'Happened to a girl called Holly last year. She had to miss the volleyball trip to France because she'd spent all her travel money on the photos. Turns out they were useless for proper modelling, but it was too late.'

'That's terrible!'

'Yup. But don't worry, you're safe now. Come on – let's go.'

I look at her gratefully. 'But what about the money? Do you want to do another song?'

'No, it's fine. I'm tired anyway. Didn't sleep too well.'

'Were you hot again last night?'

She nods and rubs her neck. It looks a bit swollen.

'And sweaty. My PJs were soaked again this morning. Exam stress, Mum says.'

'You don't look stressed.'

'I'm not.'

And it's true – she doesn't look it. Ava doesn't really do stress. Whereas I've just been doing it enough for both of us.

We collect our bags and head for the Underground. Now that we're not standing around in front of a bunch of strangers, I can start to enjoy myself. It's not often I get to wander around town with my big sister. Carnaby Street is full of trendy boutiques with pastel-painted shop fronts, and cafés with tables spilling onto the pavement. On the

corner, a group of shop girls from Liberty's are standing around in their chic black outfits and scarlet lipstick. They must be on a coffee break. I wonder if they know how cool and sophisticated they look.

Ava follows my gaze again.

'Lucky things. Mind you, that could be me in a few weeks.'

'Really? You've applied for a summer job at Liberty's?'

'Not exactly,' she says. 'Constantine & Reed.'

She pauses, waiting for me to be impressed. I'm sure I would be, but I've never heard of Constantine & Reed.

'Who?'

'Oh, come on, T. It's the biggest new fashion company in America. They're opening their first UK store in July. Everybody's talking about it.'

'Not to me.'

'Big surprise,' she says, sighing at my t-shirt and shorts combo.

Ava is the fashionista of the family, and I'm the . . . well, I'm the normal one. I'm interested in all sorts of things. Trees. Drawing. Music (as played by actual musicians). People. But not shopping. It's too complicated. Finding trousers long enough to fit me is a nightmare.

'Anyway, this is by Constantine & Reed,' Ava says, pointing at her bag, which has green and white stripes, with a logo of a snake in the middle. 'Jesse bought it on the internet for my birthday. They're opening this shop in Knightsbridge, and Louise and I applied. It pays OK and they give you a discount. If we get the job, I can afford to go surfing with Jesse for at least two weeks in August, and Louise can pay for driving lessons. It'll be brilliant.'

'So, you mean we didn't have to go busking after all?'

She looks uncomfortable. 'Well, I don't know if I've got it yet, do I? And besides, it was fun.'

She can see from my expression that 'fun' is not how I'd describe the last half-hour of my life.

'Tell you what, you can have all the takings, to make up for creepy guy accosting you like that.'

'Takings? But there aren't any.'

'Aha! Well, that's where you're wrong. One of the wrappers still had a Starburst in it. Strawberry. Your favourite. It's yours.'

She hands it to me as we reach the Underground station. It's hot and sticky and half unpeeled. I stick it in the pocket of my shorts, along with the card from Simon the scammer.

On the bright side, at least we didn't get arrested.

All the way home – standing in the crowded Tube train while Ava smiles at the man who gave up his seat for her – I try to work out why I was the girl Simon chose.

On the wall outside our bedroom there's an old clipframe stuffed with snapshots of my sister and me. Mum's favourites, mostly. Occasionally Ava sticks something in there, too. I know each one off by heart.

In the top left-hand corner, I'm a baby in Ava's arms. She's two and she's sitting in a big green armchair, proudly holding me up like a school project. She is dark-haired and gorgeous, with a low fringe over her big violet eyes. A toddler-sized Suri Cruise, without the designer shoes. I am round. And hairless. And crying. Why Mum chose that particular one, I don't know. I have a feeling it's the only one she's got of the chair.

In the middle: school photos. Ava looks like a fresh-

faced beauty queen. I look like a frightened blob. Then something changes. I'm about ten. This would be the start of my judo phase. Now I look like a blob with purpose.

Party shots: me and my friends at various birthdays, all with our arms around each others' shoulders. Then I hit twelve and start shooting up. Now my friends have their arms round my waist. At least it means my bird's-nest hair doesn't often make it into the picture.

Bottom right-hand corner, recently added: Ava's seventeenth birthday. I'm stooping down so my eyes are level with my sister's. From the side, I look like a question mark – Mum always threatens to make me do ballet if she catches me like this. Ava, meanwhile, looks like a young Elizabeth Taylor. I know this, because she's been told it so often that we looked up Elizabeth Taylor on the internet, and she was hot. She had the same violet eyes, the dark, wavy hair with its own special lustre, and the perfect curves. Afterwards, I googled a load of other movie stars from the same kind of time: Ava Gardner, Vivien Leigh, Jane Russell. My sister looks a bit like all of them, but with a better handle on eyeliner.

I know what true beauty is. I've grown up with it all my life and . . . well, that Simon guy must have been on drugs or something. Or else I look like the most gullible idiot in history.

Two

When we get home to our flat in south London, Ava goes straight to our room to put her flute away and makes some noises about doing exam revision. I'm about to follow – I have revision too – but the man who is genetically responsible for my freakiness calls to me from his bedroom, where he's at work on his computer. He leaps up as soon as I come in, with a worried expression under his bushy monobrow.

On Dad, the height and the hair and the gangly limbs just about work. He looks like a mad professor – which is what he would have become if his university hadn't suddenly sacked half the history department last summer, in a fit of cost-cutting. To be more accurate, he looks like

a mad professor crossed with an eager collie. He has so much pent-up energy. He used to get rid of some of it by bounding around the lecture theatre, inspiring his students with the delights of the English Civil War. Now he spends most of his time at home, writing a romantic novel about Cavaliers and Roundheads, or working on job applications. I'm pretty sure the energy will turn into actual electricity if he doesn't do something soon. Maybe we'll be able to use him to power the flat.

His worried look makes me nervous. My father is not a man to be left alone in a place with electrical equipment, or indeed any equipment. It's why I like to 'help' him with stuff. Otherwise, somebody usually gets hurt.

'How are you, love?' he asks, innocently.

'Fine.' I hold my breath. 'What happened?

He scuffs a toe on the carpet. I sniff for smoke. The air smells clean enough. Nothing's blown up this time, then. That's good.

'So . . . is there a problem?'

'Ah. Well, I thought I'd help your mother with the laundry while she was working today. Your sister's bedding was soaking this morning. That's the second time this week. She's not hiding a Jacuzzi in there, is she?'

'She said she was sweaty. Oh, and her neck's a bit swollen.'

'Anyway,' Dad sighs, looking guilty again, 'I got a bit distracted and twiddled a few knobs I probably shouldn't have.'

This sounds bad. Really bad.

'Is something broken?'

'Not exactly.'

He's still scuffing the floor with his toe.

'Do you want to show me?'

He nods. Like a guilty toddler, he leads me through the flat to the scene of the crime, which turns out to be the bathroom, where the washing machine lives. Placed over the bath is a clothes airer where various bits of laundry are hanging out to dry. So far so good. Except I don't recognise some of the things. They look vaguely familiar, but small, like dolls' clothes.

'Sorry, love.'

I look closer. Oh.

Two of the little things are my school skirts. At least, they were.

'The pre-wash got a bit hot. Shrinkage problem. Didn't quite realise in time.'

I look at Dad. He grins bravely. 'They'll be OK, won't they? I mean, you're stick thin. You're a string bean, you are. Anyway, Ava'll probably let you borrow one of hers.'

Yeah, Dad. And then Rihanna will ring up and ask to sing a duet. My father may be an expert on the English Civil War, but he's pretty rubbish at the history of his own family. Does he not remember that four years ago I went through a phase of being inspired by Ava's outfits and she forbade me from dressing like her, or borrowing any of her stuff, EVER AGAIN? She's recently made an exception for iTunes, but school uniform? I don't think so.

We stand in front of the airer for a moment, not saying anything. We're both thinking that before Dad lost his job this wouldn't have been much of a problem. We'd have gone to M&S and got some new skirts. But we can't do that any more. Dad's over-qualified for most of the jobs he goes for. We don't know how long his redundancy money has got to last, so every penny counts. It's why Ava

and I don't have allowances any more. He feels so bad about it that I can't really say anything, so I don't.

All the same, he senses my hesitation about approaching Ava.

'Tell you what, I'll ask her for you, if you like.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

But he can't – at least, not straight away. When we finally track her down in the living room, she's asleep with her head on a pile of untouched revision.

She's still asleep when Mum comes in from work hours later, looking as glamorous as anyone can in a green nylon polo shirt and matching trousers – which, given my mum, is surprisingly glamorous. Imagine a middle-aged Elizabeth Taylor in a green nylon trouser-suit, and you're nearly there.

Mum's the one keeping us going at the moment. It was her idea to move out of our pretty, old cottage in Richmond so we could rent it out, and find somewhere smaller. She got a job at a local superstore, as well as doing occasional translating work, which is what she's qualified for. And she still cooks all our meals, like she used to. I think this might be because she doesn't want Dad to break the oven.

'Suppertime soon,' she says, holding up a bag of fresh vegetables she picked up on the way home. 'Can you lay the table, Ted? Get Ava to help you. Goodness.'

She gently wakes Ava, who looks surprised to have drifted off.

'Oh, hi, Mum. I'll do this later,' Ava says, yawning and looking at her revision. 'I'm just going to Louise's. She wants to hear all about Carnaby Street.'

'No, you're not,' Mum says firmly. 'Suppertime is sacred, as you well know.'

'But I can grab something at Louise's.'

'A packet of crisps and some dough balls doesn't count as "something",' Mum insists.

Ava looks sulky. They have this argument several times a week. Ava claims that Mum's stunting her social skills; Mum says if she misses a decent meal it will stunt her growth. I leave them to it. Mum learnt French by working in a restaurant in Lyon when she was young. I wouldn't miss one of her meals if you paid me.

I only wish there was more of a table to lay. After we rented our cottage out, we moved into this flat above a travel shop, on a main road in Putney, two bus rides away from school. No garden. Only two bedrooms, so Ava and I have to share. (She cried.) Green walls. Brown furniture. Tiny kitchen, which is why I'm setting out the knives and forks on a small fold-up table that we've squeezed into the back of the living room.

At least it's beside a window. There's a tree – an ash – in the messy, built-up yard between us and the house behind. Every day I look for signs of leaf growth and changing colour. I miss the open spaces of Richmond Park so much it hurts. It's May, so the ash tree's feathery leaves are fully formed and starting to flutter in the gentle evening breeze. Tonight, I don't draw the curtains, so I can keep watching it as the daylight fades.

They join me, one by one: Mum with a dish of ratatouille, Dad bearing a massive salad bowl, and my sister, bearing a grudge.

'I'm fine, Mum, honest. Why shouldn't I go out later?'

'You had your head on the table when I got in. I

think you need an early night.'

'It was a refreshing nap. I'm OK now.'

'Well, I worry about you.'

'Well, don't.'

'Anyway,' Dad breaks in hurriedly, 'tell us about busking this morning. How did it go?'

'Not as well as we hoped,' Ava sighs. 'Ted got approached by a scammer with a camera, did she tell you? You can stop staring at yourself by the way, T.'

I look round guiltily. OK, so I was checking my reflection in the window. I happened to be thinking about what Simon the scammer said and I wanted to see if anything had changed, but no. There's still a blonde caterpillar where my eyebrows should be, and my hair still looks as though a half-finished bird's nest has accidentally landed on my head. My face is as moon-like as ever, with wide-apart eyes and almost invisible blonde lashes. In Year Seven, Dean Daniels said I reminded him of ET. That was before my growth spurt. Then he started calling me Friday, short for Freaky Friday, which is short for plain Freak. Class comedian, that's Dean. And I'm his favourite source of material.

'No,' Dad says. 'We were talking about . . . other things. What's a scammer?'

Ava rolls her eyes and tells him the story about Holly and the five hundred pounds. He looks horrified.

'They're really convincing, these people,' Ava shrugs. 'They advertise in local papers, too, and on the internet. They say you look totally stunning and you just need to pay for some photos, or training or whatever. They charge you a fortune for it, then – bam!'

'What?'

'Nothing happens.'

'That's "bam"?' I ask. *Nothing happens* doesn't sound very bam to me.

'They run off with your money and don't get you any work. Google "modelling scams". There's millions of them.'

'You didn't pay anything, did you?' Mum asks, hand to mouth.

'No, of course not.'

'And they picked on *Ted*?' Dad says, astonished.

Thanks, Dad.

'Don't worry, darling,' Mum says to me with a reassuring pat on the arm. 'We'd never have let you go through with it. No way is any daughter of ours getting into the clutches of the modelling industry, is she, Stephen?'

'What?' Dad asks with a start. He was miles away, staring from me to Ava and back – from freak to fabulous – and frowning in confusion.

'I said,' Mum repeats, 'we'd never have let her go through with it. It's all drugs and anorexia, isn't it?'

'Hmm, you're right,' Dad says, still not listening. 'Mandy, love, have you noticed Ava's neck? I've been comparing it to Ted's just now. That's a real lump there.'

'My glands are up,' Ava grumbles, touching her neck gingerly. 'It's been like this for ages. Oh, it's bigger now, though.'

'Goodness, you're right,' Mum says, peering closely. Then she puts her fork down, looking grim. 'No school tomorrow morning, Ava Trout. I'm taking you back to the doctor's.'

'But, Mu-um, I've got volleyball tomorrow morning!'

'Tough. You'll have to miss it. It's only one session – I'm sure they won't mind.'

'If you don't need it, can I *please* borrow your skirt?' I ask quickly.

Ava raises one eyebrow, to remind me of our many conversations on the subject. That would be a 'no' then.

I wait for Dad to back me up, but he's forgotten already. His brain's still elsewhere.

Mum catches me glaring at him. She doesn't know about the laundry, so she assumes I'm cross with him for being so surprised that it was me who got scammed, not Ava.

'Never forget, darling,' she says, 'you have your own inner beauty. You'll always be lovely to me.'

'Thanks, Mum. Great.'

I was just about OK before, but when your own mother starts talking about your 'inner beauty' you know you're officially doomed.

Three

Two weeks later, I'm modelling handbags in Paris.

SO not. Obviously. On Monday, I'm in choir practice in the assembly hall. My singing is about as impressive as my tambourine playing, but my best friend Daisy kindly drowns me out most of the time with her Pink-esque go-for-it vocals. Besides, we've got a new Head of Music called Mr Anderson, who bounces around in front of us like a lottery ball in a sorting machine and makes us do hip hop versions of Haydn and Mozart – or, as today, Take That as arranged by Tchaikovsky. It's usually great.

As always, Daisy and I stand at the back so we can chat in between the singing bits.