

I SWEAR I HEARD THIS... *AN OTHERWORLDLY PRESENCE*

Naomi Taylor

I swear I heard this creaking sound on the roof — at first I thought it was just the wind... there was such a gale blowing outside... but when the music...

No, I'll try to explain better. There's this thirteenth century church up on the hill. Everything is bare stone or wood — it feels like an honest, authentic space. It's not used for services anymore, so it has no facilities: no heating, no running water. Electricity, though. So of course, it was the obvious place to run an event... in the middle of February.



The event I put up there was a live vocal soundtrack for the silent film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. We rigged the church with atmospheric uplighters, hauled a big space heater up the hill, filled a soup kettle with mulled wine... but sometime in the afternoon the storm started. Oh, it was something else, up on that hill that night, standing by the door of this tiny stone church while the wind roared and the rain came down in sheets. Bless our audience for staggering up that path on that dark wintery evening.

And goodness the show was breathtaking... But — and here it is — I was sitting near the back of the church, wrapped in one of our for-hire blankets — I was deliriously tired — five days into our first festival, and six weeks pregnant — but I swear this happened. You know that silence that happens sometimes at the start of a concert? Well, it stayed, for the whole show, that feeling

that everyone was completely in tune with everything that was happening. The audience was absolutely rapt, it felt almost eerie.

And like I say, I swear there was this weird creaking coming from above. Quiet, insistent, like it didn't want me to forget. And that film — it gets intense... and the music that was being performed was ghostly, almost as if it was from another place entirely. The wind outside made it feel like we were all cocooned out of time somewhere — we were *there* but not there all at once.

And at the exact moment the music reached its climax, when the fire on screen took hold and the riot broke out, the door of the church flew open with the most tremendous clatter. I had an image of candles being extinguished and although the lighting hadn't changed, I felt we had been plunged into darkness, joined by some otherworldly presence that would now bear witness to this woman's story as if it was happening right then. The music never faltered. I felt I could hear the riot, roaring in my ears. I couldn't move, couldn't look away.

I have no memory of the door being closed, or anyone in the audience reacting other than as if it was all part of the experience. I felt everyone left that night in something of a trance — perhaps changed in some imperceptible way by what had taken place in that stone space up on the hill.

Naomi Taylor is a Midlands4Cities-funded PhD student at Birmingham City University who is collaborating with the British Arts Festivals Association to look at the history of, and leadership and team dynamics in, arts festivals in the UK. She is also the founder and creative director of the Chiltern Arts Festival, which in 2025 completed its eighth season.

