

Heralding the day of rest

Many expatriates, especially those from North America, where the right to shop non-stop is nearly God-given and Sundays are noted for consumer frenzy, are initially shocked that most shops are closed here on Sundays. What seems at first like a restriction of personal freedom, however, often becomes one of the aspects of life in Switzerland that foreigners most value: an official, government-mandated day of rest. Whether one observes it as the Sabbath or not, Sunday is the day when everyone is allowed to be unproductive.

In Basel there is a decades-old tradition of heralding the Sabbath, which officially begins on Saturday evening. If you are like me and sometimes forget that you live in Europe, and fear that you are not really taking advantage of the experience, I highly recommend that you take a walk up to the Münster at around 4.20 some Saturday afternoon. Standing at Münsterplatz-cum-parking lot does not alone evoke that European feeling, but when the bells begin to toll at 4.25 p.m. announcing vespers, the late afternoon church service, it's impossible not to pay attention. In contrast to the tinny recorded organ bells in my hometown, these deep tones reverberate in your body. You may notice that some of the people entering the door on the right side of the cathedral are carrying black cases of various sizes. These are members of Basel's Stadtposaunenchor, consisting of a total of 50 amateur trumpeters and trombonists who volunteer their time and energy to provide Basel with its weekly Saturday serenade and New Year's Eve fanfare.

If you wish, you can also attend the vesper service at 4.30, at which various choirs in the Basel region sing, or have a coffee at one of the two restaurants on Münsterplatz, Rollerhof or Café zum Isaak to pass the half hour until the Vesperblasen at five. In fair weather, you will want to stand in front of or to the left of the Münster in order to see and hear the musicians who stand on a narrow balcony on the left tower. If the weather is rainy or windy, check the right door to the cathedral for a sign saying "Vesperblasen im Kreuzgang." The entrance to the Kreuzgang (cloister) is further to the right and is a peaceful and beautiful spot in Basel with or without music. Through the glassed-in arches on the Rhine side, in front of which the musicians stand in bad weather, you can see buildings in Kleinbasel and the hills of Germany in the distance.

Exactly when the bells have finished tolling five o'clock, the brass choir sounds. The music immediately transports you to another age and time when everything was slower, evoking images of ceremonies, princes and dukes and pomp and circumstance. In medieval times, trumpeter was an important, highly paid profession. Every city and nobleman had trumpeters. Fees for trumpeters' garb and salaries can be found on Basel-Stadt ledgers dating back to 1384. Only the musicians' clothes and the occasional airplane passing over remind you that this is the 21st century. Surprisingly and sadly, there is usually only a handful of listeners — faithful regulars and passersby, not all of whom are able to pause long enough to enjoy the 15-minute concert. For those willing to pause and really listen, the complex music, in which each of the four to six instruments has a melodic line, rewards in harmony and richness, sometimes regal and grand, sometimes lulling with the hypnotic quality of Gregorian chants. Exactly at the stroke of quarter past five, the magic spell is broken as the music ends. We listeners have the choice of going back to our usual hectic routine or letting this magical quality linger to grace our day of rest.

A similar ritual is offered to us fortunate residents of Basel every new year. Shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve, crowds preferring reflection to revelry gather on Münsterplatz to hear the Stadtposaunenchor — a larger formation with one group on the tower and one on the ground — perform chorales. During Basel's 500th anniversary celebration, we will be treated to a unique experience. At 11.15 on Sunday, August 19th, brass choirs will sound from 11 different spires in Basel-Stadt and seven spires in Baselland. Be sure to pause and listen or, like the day of rest, you might miss it.