University Challenge was the worst exam I have ever done

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Examinations are the hallmark of medical education, and I hated every one. So why volunteer for another exam, with inevitable, predictable, public failure? Because it is iconic, because I am now in my f**k-it fifties, because life is short, work is hard, and this could also be frivolous fun—and should remain important. Further, this was Jeremy Paxman’s last series of University Challenge, and my household has a standing WhatsApp group to show off their answers. Others in my family score high teens and early twenties. I am lucky if I get perhaps two in total. I ummed and aahed, torn by the potential outcomes of hilarity and humiliation. My husband, whose loyalty has never been in doubt, encouraged: “You should definitely do it. You don’t know anything about modern culture, sport, geography, history, or art, or . . . medicine . . . but, still, you should definitely do it.”

Fail to prepare—prepare to fail! Reader, I prepared. Classical music: I used to sing in a choir. Give me a bar, and I will give you the rest of the aria; ask me to name the title, or composer, and I will look blank. So, I dusted down dozens of scores, listened to each, and re-committed them to memory. Rossini’s Petite Messe Solennelle, Verdi’s and Duruflé’s requiems, Vaughan Williams’s A Sea Symphony, Walton and Belfrannar’s Feast. Bonus questions: ah, the use of opera samples in contemporary music, of course. Faithless, “Drifting Away” (sampling Mefistofele, Boito’s only opera), Warren G and Sissel’s “Prince Igor” (opera of the same name, composed by Borodin). I revised enthusiastically. I tested myself most nights. I thought I would at least bring my team some points on classical music.

There was no classical music question.

I thought that perhaps bees might come up because I had a dream about bees. I learnt about carpenter bees, mason bees, and mining bees. There were no questions about bees.

With Liz Truss as prime minister at the time of recording, surely the shortest serving prime ministers was a good punt. I learnt a long list and thought their constituencies would also be a good question (Gordon Brown, Dunfermline East; Theresa May, Maidenhead). Nope. I felt that identifying birdsong would be a great question, installed an app from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and did my daily homework. Goldfinches, woodpigeons, robins. All lovely. There was nothing on birdsong.

I thought I should tackle the subject of sport, decided to specialise, and learnt about the winners of the Tour de Femmes. I disappeared into a bookish wormhole, only to emerge as an expert on the history of the suffragettes. That did not come up either. Knowing that popular culture was another major weakness, I thought I should concentrate my time on buffing up on Succession, the award winning, deliciously horrible comedy drama, where I learnt the difference between Hearts and Hibs football teams, that Kieran Culkin is brother of Macaulay, and that it was part filmed in the V&A, Dundee, and Gleneagles. Indeed, that was not asked either.

Flags though: there are always flags. I have a vexillologist in the family (I also learnt a lot of “ologies,” from apiology (bees) to pomology (fruits): no questions on that). I decided to especially cover flags with animals in them and flags with stars in them. And yes, a flag I learnt came up! I could not, of course, under pressure and under very bright lights, remember which one it was. I tried not to laugh (and failed there too). I thought something on T S Eliot’s The Wasteland might be asked. I was correct! But even then, I failed to remember what I did, somewhere, know. The pressure of the camera was horrible.

I have not got any better at exams. By contrast, radio is easy. When recording for Radio 4, I cycle to the BBC, swipe my pass, and, perspiring lightly in cycling gear, invisibly enter a tiny cupboard containing a microphone. I get out my notes and, undistracted, speak down the line to whoever wants to listen, and then leave, undetected. Television studios are filled with people and require make up, swishy hair, and quick retouchings under the lights. TV is sparkle, pizazz, and scary. Never has my dark, lonely cupboard been more inviting. Under lights, with a buzzer at ones’ fingertips, and knowing that my children would eventually watch with their heads in their cupboard, University Challenge was easily the worst exam I have ever done; and I speak as a woman who could usually salvage a pass fail oral.

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