

Christopher Gillett | 02 February 2015

Christopher Gillett **The cult of the Maestro**



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For a nation built on independence and social equality, America can be pretty obsessed with rank and hierarchy. Why else would they address even ordinary conductors as 'Maestro'? Briefly stationed in LA, Chris Gillett ponders on the difference in musical customs between the US and the UK.



'Hi guys, my name is Nasturtium and I'll be your server for this evening. What can I get ya?'

'Um, I'll have a cheeseburger please.'

'Awesome!'

I'm in America again – in Los Angeles, where people wear hats while they dine in fine restaurants and other people just put up with it. Where you never get to wear the just-in-case jacket and tie you packed for your trip. Where a plaid shirt counts as formal wear.

I love it. I also love that the waste disposal unit is called an 'Insinkerator'. I love it that in any supermarket, a fine shower of water sprays onto the fresh salads every few minutes and that you are warned by a rumble of fake tropical thunder.

I don't love that you have to wash all dishes before putting them into the dishwasher. I don't understand how Americans are happy to carry on buying machines that don't do what they're supposed to. You might as well buy a car which only works if it's pulled by a horse.

Besides a national inability to pronounce croissant correctly, another thing I don't understand is why American opera singers (my wife among them) are obsessed with calling conductors Maestro.

My experience has often been that the conductor is the least prepared person in the room

Aside from the level of respect it implies for someone who most singers actually want to take outside and show the business end of a length of two-by-four, it's so resolutely formal and old-fashioned. It gives the impression that there's only one guy in the room who is the master of his craft, when my experience has often been that the conductor is the least prepared person in the room and thus the least qualified to tell anyone else how the opera should go.

[More Maestros than you can shake a stick at: Amazon's Mozart in the Jungle \(/uk/features/series/everyones-talking-about/amazon-prime-tv-series-one-mozart-in-the-jungle-review\)](#)

Back in England I think the only conductor I've ever called Maestro was Carlos Kleiber (/uk/learn/artists/carlos-kleiber) – someone who, I think we can all agree, deserved the epithet. Haitink (/uk/learn/artists/bernard-haitink) and Davis (/uk/learn/artists/colin-davis) were both, as I recall, Bernard and Colin to all and sundry at Covent Garden. And believe me, I was definitely sundry.

Besides, in England, if you're my age, it's difficult to hear Maestro and not remember one of these, the Austin Maestro; notoriously unreliable and thus the most aptly-named car in history:



I'm not singing in Los Angeles – my wife is doing that – but I have sung here a few times. The first time was in 2006 in a *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* conducted by Harry Bicket. All around me, my American colleagues were Maestro-ing like mad. 'Maestro? But he's Harry!' I wanted to say. It seemed odd that in a country which prides itself on a lack of aristocracy, people are so eager to enoble, to become serfs beneath the yoke of a feudal lord. Where's their spirit of revolution, of the New World? What happened to the ideal of respect being earned rather than expected?

It's not just in rehearsals that they drop the Maestro bomb. The opera company will throw it into every possible communication. 'There will be a notes session afterwards with Maestro Tonedead!' an email will say. 'Maestro No-Upbeat would like to invite the cast to dine at a restaurant and tell you all what you should eat!' That sort of thing.

Still, on the plus side, you get a level of service in American opera houses unrivalled anywhere else in the world. My dresser used to walk me to the wings then wait there with a bottle of water and slippers (I was barefoot in the show) before walking me back again after my scenes. It was lovely and made me feel rather special.

A note to the novice, though: at the end of the run you are expected to tip your dresser and whoever does your make-up for their service. The basic rate is \$10 each per show, in cash, in an envelope. You never know, you may well get an 'Awesome!' in return.

Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\)](#). The tenor's own blog is christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk>).

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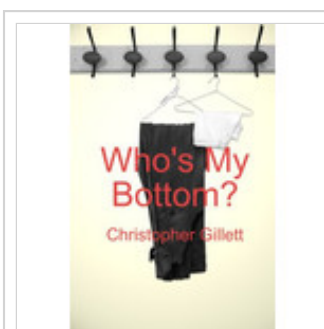
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