

Festivals: No holiday for performers



French villa in Aix-en-Provence © Nikolay-Dimitrov - ecobo/ Shutterstock

Sun, relaxation and good wine – surely everybody loves music festivals? Not the performer, says tenor Christopher Gillett. The rewards of the South of France may be outweighed by low pay, late nights and long weeks in dusty rehearsal studios.

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Isn't it odd how the words 'music festival' can evoke such different images? To the world at large a music festival is tents, mud, drugs, high decibels and veggie burgers. For the classical music fan it's string quartets, an opera or two, something with Simon Callow, smart dress and a good picnic. The only common denominators are portable loos and [Paul Morley](/uk/features/series/paul-morley) (</uk/features/series/paul-morley>).

Even time is different. Glastonbury lasts just a few days whereas Edinburgh is a few weeks, and Glyndebourne several months. At classical festivals people actually get to sleep. In beds. Though not always their own, it has to be said.

Festivals are enjoying a renaissance and popping up everywhere – though many of the big festivals of my younger years have diminished considerably or even vanished altogether. Fishguard, Camden, Bath, Harrogate... either gone or a shadow of their former selves.

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Festivals are good news for the humble freelance singer (is there any other kind?), for they provide summer employment, tiding you over during the times when the opera houses have decamped to their deckchairs. The lure of festivals is the prospect of lots of sun and a convivial, relaxed, fun atmosphere – often in compensation for a poor fee. Of course, the sun thing doesn't necessarily apply to Edinburgh, or most of Britain for that matter. For that you have to head south, to France, perhaps.

It's easy to get excited by, say, the prospect of a couple of months in Aix-en-Provence, scoffing delicious food, quaffing chilled rosé and splashing around in a sun-drenched pool, forgetting that this is what the punters get to do, not you. Chances are you can't afford a pool. You're there to work. You have to spend weeks and weeks rehearsing in hot, dusty studios, minding you don't get dehydrated or overtired, staying in good voice.

Performance times can be deeply unsettling. In Aix, when you perform outdoors the curtain often doesn't rise until well after 9pm. When I last sang there I was launching into my aria at nearly one in the morning, hours past my usual Horlicks and bedtime routine. The result of performing so late is that you are usually wide awake until just before dawn.

The next day, when you had planned to really enjoy the summer – a wander around the market, a dip in someone else's pool – you are desperately trying to catch up on sleep, and by the time you emerge into the light, the market has packed up and the sun is already descending in the west. It's not exactly awful, but it's not what you imagined when you signed the contract, the word 'festival' winking at you like a suntanned starlet.

[Read more of Christopher Gillett's columns on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett\). His backstage account of *Der Rosenkavalier* at Glyndebourne \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/glyndebourne-4\) continues.](#)

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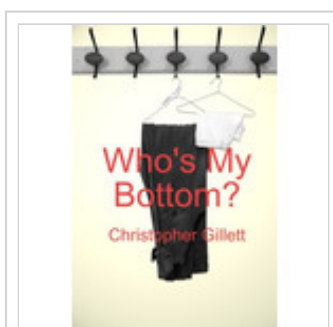
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