

Inside Out Christopher Gillett on the 'jump-in'



Tenor Christopher Gillett's unexpurgated view of life on, off, behind and under the stage.



Following the sudden, last-minute departure and replacement of the leading lady in the Royal Opera's *Robert le diable*, the tenor muses on being the singer called as the 'jump-in'...

While rehearsing Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Bari three years ago I bumped into our not-very-good Oberon at the train station, his suitcase at his side. He said chokingly that his mother was not well and he was leaving the show to be with her. I did my best to console him, in spite of the excited text message I'd just got from Snout telling me that a Brit counter-tenor was on a plane to Puglia because the Italian one had 'just been sacked!'

I bring this up because there's a lot of hoo-ha about the replacement of a soprano, by 'mutual consent', on the eve of the dress rehearsal of the Royal Opera's new *Robert le diable*. It's something I've witnessed many times. One day, usually with the premiere just a few days away, a singer is audibly struggling with a role, and the next day they've vanished. There's no warning that this will happen, apart from your own gnarled instincts that it might, and there's usually no announcement from anybody higher up the food chain before or after it happens. Hey presto, Singer A is gone, forgotten, and now we have to start all over again with Singer B.

Singers know when we're not doing well enough. Even when we're ill we just hope no-one will notice, but when The Management starts hanging around rehearsals having whispered conversations with the conductor, you can bet that someone is in for the chop. You just hope it's not you, though there's every chance that one day it might well be.

In these circumstances, one singer's loss is another's gain, for a jump-in can be lucrative and exciting, despite the jump-in nightmare being the number one, most commonly-dreamt nightmare among opera singers throughout the world. This is a dream in which you find yourself standing onstage (that's if you can

even find the stage) trying to perform a role you've agreed to sing but which you actually don't know at all. You're just la-la-laaing your way through, say, *Rigoletto*, ignorant of the tunes or text except for the well-known bits, while a massive audience looks on in stunned silence. You're probably naked to boot.

A jump-in is rarely simple. Once, asked to jump in for a concert in Berlin, I was already busy with my promise to take my daughter and all her stuff back to university in Leeds. I had to make both things work. Up before dawn, I drove her the 250 miles from Somerset to her new digs, carried furniture, boxes and books up four flights of stairs, before driving down to East Midlands Airport to catch a late Ryanair flight to Berlin, where I managed a few hours sleep before my rehearsal first thing the next morning.

And you thought we just lie around on elegant chaises longues waiting for the phone to ring.

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