

Inside Out **Christopher Gillett sniffs at sneezers**



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



If you have even a hint of a winter sniffle, don't you dare come anywhere near tenor Christopher Gillett, or in fact any singer. Stay at home.

The superstar tenor Jonas Kaufmann had some flack recently for refusing to shake the hands of the fans that greet him after a show, lest one of them unwittingly transmits a cold or flu bug. The late Pavarotti famously sat onstage in Chicago during concert performances of Verdi's *Otello* with what looked like the entire stock of Walgreens – America's answer to Boots the chemist – at his elbow.

The anticipation and avoidance of infection makes up a very large part of a singer's psyche, to the point of hypochondria. It can even induce a more advanced form of bonkers-ness where the singer, all too aware that cold symptoms can be psychosomatic, tries to convince himself or herself that the best form of prevention is to pretend you don't care at all. That works fine until the moment someone close to you starts sneezing. Then you quickly find yourself squirting First Defence up your nostrils by the pintful.

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My travelling spongebag rattles with medicines garnered from across the globe, all of which battle some of the symptoms of a bad throat. The conventional offerings in Britain, which 'civilians' take, are no good for us. Well-known remedies such as Lemsip or Night Nurse both contain antihistamines, which might clear a blocked nose but will quickly render you voiceless. Any medication that claims to get a civilian straight back to work is, frankly, a bloody nuisance as it just encourages highly infectious cold sufferers to wander the streets when they should be isolated at home, well away from self-employed singers like me, thank you very much. Many of my standby medications come from the USA, where hypochondria is more popular than baseball.

My wife (also a singer) and I have also bought various steamers and humidifiers in many countries, only to leave them behind for lack of packing space. We now have 'Humdiflyers', from Australia. A Humidiflyer is a transparent plastic mask, like an oxygen mask, that helps you maintain a good level of humidity when you fly. It also makes you look like a character from a David Lynch movie, but in the battle to sing well that's a small price to pay.

No, I'm 100 per cent with Jonas Kaufmann on this one. It's bad enough running the gauntlet of taking trains or buses, filled as they usually are with barking children and sniffing students for whom a cold is just a mild nuisance. For a singer, a cold is nothing short of an unmitigated disaster and all the hand sanitisers on the planet will not convince me that touching sick people is a risk worth taking.