

Who wants to be a millionaire?



Anyone who thinks opera singers are millionaires living in gilded cages can think again, says Christopher Gillett. He's willing to disclose his own fees to make the point that he'd be better off as a stagehand than a tenor with 30 years' experience.



Ah, money. At this time of the year, who has any? In my job you're not supposed to talk about money, except to your agent, with whom you talk about very little else. There certainly exists a conceit that to talk about money is unseemly, and inconsistent with being a true artist. Well, that's just tosh and nonsense.

Everybody does talk about money in my business – rather a lot actually – but very rarely does anyone talk about their fee. Fees are a closely guarded secret. Comparing your fee with another singer is ripe with danger. If their fee is bigger, you will be miffed that your services are being undervalued. If their fee is smaller, while you may enjoy a brief frisson of smugness, it will come at the price of their resentment. So, very rarely does the subject come up except in sweeping generalisations. 'I can't believe I'm doing this job for the crap fees they pay here', someone (usually a tenor I'm afraid) will share over coffee. 'In Madrid they pay me three times what I'm getting for this.' This leaves the bragger's confidant to do a mass of wild calculations and estimations, particularly if he himself was actually rather pleased with the fee he was getting for the job. Of course, the bragger may be fishing, trying to get the confidant to reveal his fee, but if the confidant has any sense he won't. Until now.

Let's get down to basics. How much do we singers get paid? It's a very broad topic and one I can't possibly cover in its entirety in the space of one blog, but the popular myth is that it's absolutely shedloads of cash. Well, that's also tosh and nonsense.

A tiny few get paid a lot. When I say a lot I mean \$16,000 (£10,000) per performance. Sources tell me that's roughly the fee for a star singer of the likes of [Renée Fleming](/uk/learn/artists/renee-fleming) and [Jonas Kaufmann](/uk/learn/artists/jonas-kaufmann); someone who is carrying the weight of a show at the Metropolitan Opera, probably the highest paying opera house these days. Stars will get bigger fees for special events in far-flung places – an arena concert in Dubai perhaps – but for an opera the budget is tighter.

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For those of us further down the food chain the fee structure is more erratic and your fee will depend on your experience as much as the size of the role. A young singer who is offered a large role will probably be offered a low fee, with the argument that the opera house is taking a risk and it's all about the opportunity for the young singer to prove herself (or himself). The rationale is that the singer should be grateful and any fee is, frankly, a bonus. Young singers, in general, are very poorly paid and you'll find many of them doing other jobs simply to pay the rent. Most of them won't get a proper fee until they hit their thirties and then they might have 20 or so decent years of earning ahead of them, if they're lucky.

What about someone like me, a 'jobbing singer' with over 30 years' experience? Abroad, I get from €3,000 to €5,000 a performance, depending on the opera house. In Britain, where fees are historically low, I get about half that, again depending on the house. That's for a small role. Note for note, I'm doing pretty well. When I first sang at Covent Garden in 1984, I was paid £145 per performance. That's now the equivalent of £395, so the internet tells me. At the time, it seemed pretty good. It did seem like a bonus, especially as I'd just been working at Sadler's Wells singing a lead role for a paltry £90 a week, which was just £5 a week more than the chorus.

I should spell out some home truths. First and foremost, the very nature of opera means that we don't sing that many shows in a year. An in-demand singer might do 40 performances or so, but that could be pushing it. Long rehearsal periods, for which it is extremely rare to be paid anything at all, as well as essential rest gaps between shows mean that doing any more is well-nigh impossible. I haven't had 40 shows in a year for quite a while, and certainly not at my top fee.

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More crucially, these fees are gross fees and after we've paid foreign taxes (which are taken straight off the gross fee, often at the rate of 30 per cent; in New York it is 36 per cent), agents (there goes another 10 to 17.5 per cent), landlords (we usually have to pay for our digs), airfares, union dues (compulsory in the USA), accountants, vocal coaches and all the usual paraphernalia of running a small business, we're lucky to walk away with 50 per cent. A famous soprano once told me that she had so many people on her payroll that she rarely netted more than 25 per cent of her fees. Apply that to a £10,000 fee and it doesn't look so whopping anymore. We're not singers strutting around there on stage, we're a veritable small business park that's bawling high notes.

If an opera singer misses a performance through illness or even a strike - so through no fault of his own - he doesn't get paid one penny. But a lot of the constant expenses (the costs of doing business in a foreign city) still remain in place. And of course, every sensible singer is saving for the day they can't sing any more, and who knows with any certainty when that day will come? Then there are the rogue employers who fail to pay up. Rome Opera has been taking over three months to pay its singers, often longer, after they've finished the job and left the city. (Italy is the only country where I was never paid, for three concerts, and it looks like it is slipping back into its bad old ways.)

If anyone reading this is thinking of having a go at being a singer just for the money, I suggest you think again.

At the end of the year the so-called star diva, whom you imagine is bedecked in fur coats and Rolex watches, living in a gilded apartment, is probably taking home less than an NHS GP or a country solicitor. The middling singer would probably be financially better off as a teacher or truck driver. So, if anyone reading this is thinking of having a go at being a singer just for the money, I suggest you think again. Try conducting, where the fees are much higher, the necessity to turn up to rehearsals is less rigorous, the obligation to learn the score in advance is lightly understood and the inability to play an instrument or sing a note, or even to be able to beat in time, is not a barrier to advancement.

Or become a stagehand. At the Met you could earn over half a million dollars a year. Don't believe me? Read this from the New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/28/arts/hey-stars-be-nice-to-the-stagehands-you-might-need-a-loan.html?hpw&rref=theater&r=0>).

Excuse me while I get myself a toolkit and a donut.

Read more of Christopher Gillett's opinions on Sinfini Music (</uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett>).

[christophergillett.co.uk](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm) (<http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm>)

saddoabroad.blogspot.com (<http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/>)

Read pianist Daniel Tong's response inspired by this column on signers' pay. (</uk/features/other-features/pay-for-pianists>)

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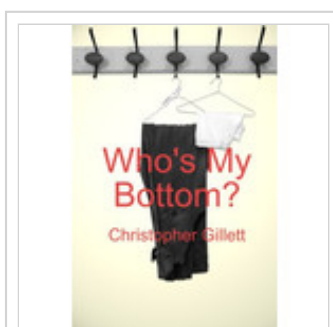
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