

## Age before beauty? **Older singers lose out**



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For many developing singers, young artist programmes are seemingly the only way to break onto the professional opera scene. But Christopher Gillett wonders if YAPs are all they're cracked up to be...

Here's a paradox: there have never been more young artist programmes than there are now, yet it has never been harder for a young singer to break into the profession.

Back in my day, while it wasn't exactly a doddle, I'm sure there were more opportunities to get yourself noticed. In your early twenties you left university or music college (which had all been paid for by grants) and just got on with it, singing with a myriad of small companies, albeit for very little pay. Now, it's not unusual for singers to spend as many as eight or nine years closeted as a student, during which time they become saddled with staggering amounts of debt.

After that, if they are well-developed, lucky, or happen to tick the right boxes, the young singer may get taken by an opera house into its 'studio' or young artist programme (YAP), doing a lot of understudying and singing minor roles. Those that don't can find it very difficult to get noticed, some even resorting to paying small companies to allow them to sing principal roles.

**A lot of us old hands aren't great fans of YAPs.**

We grew up in a time when there were proper opera companies with singers of all ages. Old men were sung by old men. The cynics among us saw the birth of YAPs as a way of filling small roles cheaply; particularly aggravating if you were up for a mature role only for it to be given to some kid from the YAP wearing a shaggy beard and a ton of make-up.

Filling small roles with YAP singers also fell into the trap of thinking that small parts are easy, when any old lag will tell you that singing small parts requires large amounts of experience, savvy and nerve. Faced with just a few bars to sing, an inexperienced singer will often panic and become frozen with nerves. It's

perfectly understandable; your opportunity to make your mark is confined to a few phrases. Even a great singer may not impress if all he has to do is enter with a tray and sing that dinner is ready. Small roles rarely have the chance to show off their 'money notes'. Old hands worry less about such things.

Occasionally the young artist will get their big break as an understudy, but it's quite rare. Houses sometimes have a cover run, where the understudies get to do some (or even all) of the opera in front of management and other members of the company. This is the norm at Glyndebourne. When I covered Ferrando in *Così fan tutte* there in the 1980s, we had an hour in which to showcase our talents (Gerald Finley and Alison Hagley were two of my co-covers) and the bright spark of an assistant director, for whom this was also a chance to show off, suggested that we do our scenes in reverse order, effectively doing the story backwards. The idea didn't last long.

Opera Holland Park has come up with a brilliant and heartwarming solution. For one of its productions - this year it was *The Turn of the Screw* - it has a proper, public performance specifically for the young artists who have covered the rest of the shows. There are no half measures, no compromises. They get to do one performance and the public pays to see it. They even get their own dress rehearsal. I think that's just brilliant.

I take my hat off to Holland Park. Rather than showcases and concerts of bleeding chunks, their young artists are getting to do the real thing. And on the evidence of the [Britten \(/uk/learn/composers/benjamin-britten\)](http://uk.learn.composers/benjamin-britten), they are rising to the occasion.

**Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/festivals-are-no-holiday-for-singers\)](http://uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/festivals-are-no-holiday-for-singers).**

The tenor's own blog is [christophergillett.co.uk. \(http://christophergillett.co.uk/\)](http://christophergillett.co.uk)

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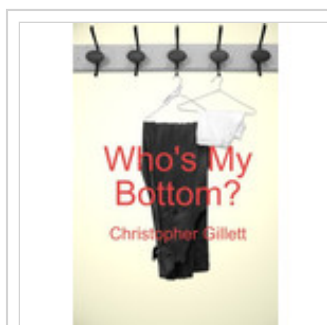
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