

Alcohol and the opera house



Alcohol and the opera house © Diane Diederich at iStockphoto.com

Having a glass of wine (or three) might be a pleasant way for audience members to pass the interval, but most singers would agree that alcohol is an indulgence to be avoided, both in and outside of musicians' office hours. Tenor Christopher Gillett offers a personal perspective.



Booze and the opera house go pretty much hand-in-hand. As anyone who has worked at Glyndebourne will tell you, the audience is always much, much perkier after the long interval; its laughter (and the odd snore) far more raucous. There's no doubt that it's the alcohol that does it – you can even smell the boozy breath from stage. How many of the punters yelling their opinions during [last month's first night of Guillaume Tell at the Royal Opera](#) ([/uk/features/news/first-reviews-of-damiano-michieletto-guillaume-tell-at-royal-opera-house-on-29-june-2015](#)) were well-tanked when they let rip with their booing, I wonder?

There's no denying that most opera singers like a drink or two as well, but for the most part, boozing is left strictly until after the show. All that champagne we sosh about in party scenes on stage is just ginger ale, after all – backstage, most of us are glugging water by the litre, or tea.

The modern wisdom is that alcohol and quality singing do not cohabit well

According to the film *The Great Caruso*, the great tenor used to swallow a shot of scotch before hitting the stage. I'm told the wonderful Wagnerian soprano Kirsten Flagtsad used to swear by a cold pint of lager during a performance to relax her voice, and I've known a few German singers who advocate a cold beer for keeping the voice clear. But the modern wisdom is that alcohol and quality singing do not cohabit well. There's a myriad of reasons: alcohol dehydrates the vocal cords, it causes acid reflux, it can lead to

vocal hemorrhaging... but most obviously, it just seems like a bad idea. You wouldn't drive a car when you've had a few drinks, so why would you risk damaging the tiny mechanism that earns you your livelihood – and your reputation too?

Just as modern professional cricketers have eschewed a pork pie and a couple of pints for their matchday lunch, so have most singers become very disciplined about their show-day drinking. It's not just the voice you have to worry about: there's the music and words to remember, and a potentially dangerous stage to negotiate as well. And it's not just the drinker's performance that alcohol affects: singing with a colleague who's not pulling their weight simply because they're befuddled by booze is rarely enjoyable. It's frustrating and invasive, and can affect your work as well as theirs.

What drives a singer to drink? The loneliness and boredom of long stints away from home (where socialising provides much needed relief from an otherwise hermit-like existence) can mean that the travelling singer finds himself reaching for the wine bottle (and the paracetamol in the morning) rather more than he might at home, and definitely more than he should. And there's another pitfall – singing while on painkillers is a risky business for the delicate vocal membranes.

The release provided by singing and by a good glass of wine can be pretty similar

There have been many singers who perform under the influence, and most of those have come to a dismal end. The tenor who operated a full bar in his dressing-room, the baritone whose cola bottle disguised a few shots of vodka... the usual rationalisation being that a little drink will calm the nerves. But there's more to it than that. The release provided by singing and by a good glass of wine can be pretty similar. For many of us, the need to be a singer is rooted in our psyche. It's not just about the voice. As a psychologist to whom I had just revealed my rather buttoned-up, emotionally-chilled upbringing said: 'And you wonder why you became a singer?' The occasional drink might seem like a good idea if it helps unburden you from your personal demons and helps you express yourself, but it really isn't. Orchestral players often struggle with the same problem, so [it's heartening to see the victims of addiction now forming a special orchestra \(/uk/features/news/new-note-orchestra-in-brighton-aims-to-help-musicians-with-alcohol-addiction-issues-with-workshop-on-18-july-2015\)](#).

I drank and performed once or twice, out in the regions, when I was very young – and I'm not proud to admit that. It was only messing up during a *Marriage of Figaro* in Weymouth that made me recognise the dangers. As anyone who has read my book *Who's My Bottom?* may remember, my mother was an alcoholic. Booze killed her. Given the genetic triggers for alcoholism, it's something I often think about, but – perhaps ironically – it's singing that has saved me from her tragic inheritance. Had I been a city banker instead, I'm not sure my fate would be so happy.

Fortunately, not everyone has had my same, sobering experience and I hope they never will. But I really hope they realise on their own that singing and a lot of alcohol simply aren't happy bedfellows.

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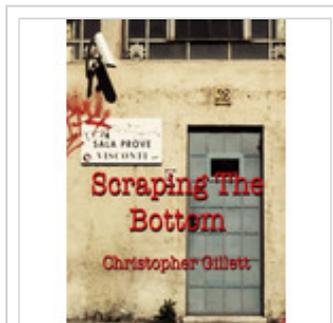
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