

Christopher Gillett on New Year waltzing



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



Christopher Gillett on New Year's Day waltzing – or not.

I have often told the story of how, when I was rehearsing *Otello* at Covent Garden in the 1980s, I fell into conversation with the fabled, near mythical maestro Carlos Kleiber about the traditional New Year concert in Vienna which he'd recently conducted.

In spite of his ebullient and extrovert baton style, Kleiber was a shy and self-deprecating man who, it seemed to me, was bemused by all the fuss that was made over him. I'd say he confessed to me, but that might give the impression that he gave a toss about what I thought about it, so I'll simply say that he told me that he didn't really know one Strauss waltz from another.

'You know, za problem wiz all zat Strauss is it all sounds za same,' he said in his thick Austro-German accent. 'I had no idea which piece was which. Zo I put down a downbeat, waited for it to start and then I thought oh yes, it's zis one, off ve go!'

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I suspect he was playing me like a violin as I stood there in open-mouthed awe to the man I held, and still hold, to be the greatest conductor I've ever seen and heard. I'm trying to imagine today's most successful and famous Strauss performer, André Rieu, playing me like any sort of violin and though I don't know him, the image is not exactly working for me.

Two more polar opposites than Rieu and Kleiber, it is hard to imagine. And you could say the same of their Strauss concerts. The rarefied atmosphere of the Musikverein, whose audiences don't so much applaud as rattle their jewellery, sits in striking contrast to the vast sports arenas across the globe where Rieu's glitzy, pastel offerings enchant his adoring fans, and whereas to play in André Rieu's orchestra the

possession of an ample bosom would appear to be something of an advantage, for the Vienna Philharmonic there's no doubt that having breasts of any description is a serious bar to membership. Take your pick.

Not being much of a Strauss fan I find those Viennese concerts as appealing as a barium meal, in which the barium has been replaced by an enormous wedge of cream-topped Sachertorte.

You can listen to the New Year's Day Concert 2014 conducted by Daniel Barenboim:

[On Radio 3, Wednesday 1 January 10.15 \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03m05hb\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03m05hb)

[On BBC2 Wednesday 1 January 11.15 and BBC 4 at 19.00 for highlights \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00glnh8/broadcasts/upcoming\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00glnh8/broadcasts/upcoming)

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