

## How do you learn a role?



Operas can last anything up to about five hours and be sung in any number of exotic languages. How do you go about learning a role? Apparently mopping the kitchen floor is a crucial component. Chris Gillett reveals the dangers and difficulties, as well as some of the short-cuts that singers take when practising new music.

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There are two questions an opera singer can guarantee to be asked at some stage in their career; usually by a well-meaning but slightly drunk punter whose wife has dragged him away from the golf course to a night at the opera. The first is 'What's your proper job?' and the second, 'How long did it take to learn your role?'

Subduing the urge to whack the punter with a five-iron, the singer launches into a lengthy explanation of Learning An Opera. This differs significantly from Learning A Play in that the singer has to know everything from memory before the very first day of rehearsal whereas the actor does not.

For the singer this means weeks and weeks of note-bashing at the piano, listening to recordings (if they're available and the singer on disc is getting the notes right), visits to coaches at your own expense, and half-singing to yourself as you, say, mop the kitchen floor. You get no help from an opera house. It's relentlessly boring. I spend a good amount of time on trains, staring out of the window and muttering recitative, which pretty-well guarantees me an aisle all to myself.

**I've flirted with danger and the strict meaning of 'learnt' as stipulated in my contract**

I'll hold up my hand that in my time I've flirted with danger and the strict meaning of 'learnt' as stipulated in my contract. There's what I like to call 'learnt to rehearsal level' which means that, no, I couldn't sing the whole role off-book with 100% accuracy on Day One, but I know it well enough to get through the rehearsal process and hold up no-one else (a cardinal sin), especially if there are six weeks to go before opening, and it's a new piece that no-one, even the composer and especially the conductor, quite knows.

In a difficult modern opera, a certain degree of unfamiliarity is tolerated. With standard repertoire it isn't, not least because if you don't know your role, there are many other people who do and your chances of getting sacked are infinitely greater. I once saw a Iago disappear from the Royal Opera production of *Otello* this way, though officially of course he was 'indisposed'.

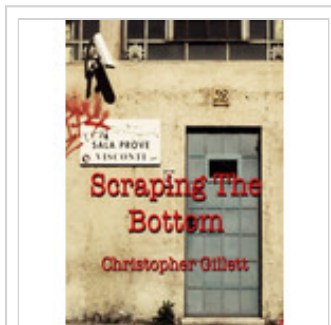
If I've flirted with danger there are some singers, many of them massively famous, who go out and skate on wafer-thin ice whilst wearing nothing but a jockstrap and a backpack full of rocks. How they do it is beyond me. I've shared the stage with a certain tenor whose grip on a score has been, at best, sketchy. But by dint of masses of chutzpah and a bond with the prompt box only superglue could rival, he managed his way through the whole opera, singing gloriously and fooling the happy thousands that the thing was in his very blood.

If you think I'm going to say who it was, you've got another think coming.

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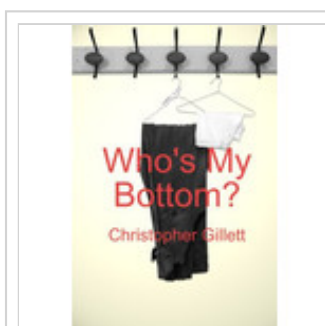
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