

Inside Out Booming the operatic baddies



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Tenor Christopher Gillett can't understand the new trend for audiences to boo singers who portray the baddies in opera, even when they've sung brilliantly. It's just plain rude, because after all, opera isn't panto - oh no it's not!



Many things baffle me - the allure of liquorice, the Duckworth-Lewis Method, bra hooks, the plot of the first *Mission Impossible* film, to name but a few - but few things baffle me more than the habit of booing at the opera. Now, given that I'm a tenor, bafflement comes easily, but this one has really got me in knots.

As far as I can tell, audiences only boo in two forms of theatre: opera and the panto. But these are also two different forms of booing. The tradition of booing a performer that you don't like surely goes back to the days of the *claque*, probably beyond, when theatre-going was generally a rowdier experience. Back then it was as common to hear booing at a play as it was at the opera. So why did straight theatre give up a practice that remains strong in the opera house? I've shared the stage with very fine singers in very fine opera houses whose performance didn't match the expectation of some vocal members of the audience and it's a shocking and crushing experience to hear your colleagues booed. I've sat in theatres and watched some truly awful performances in plays, the only dissent being expressed by unenthusiastic applause or the sound of emptying seats. Never, ever, boos.

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The other form of booing, panto-booing, is an altogether different beast with its roots in *commedia dell'arte*. It's about audience participation. Fine, I get that. But why has it become commonplace at the opera to hear evil characters greeted with panto-boos at the curtain calls? It doesn't happen in straight theatre. It would be shocking to hear Rory Kinnear's Iago at the National Theatre being greeted with panto-booing when Kinnear, not Iago, takes his bow. It would be thought to be crass. Yet every time a tenor who has worked his tits off singing Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly* steps forward for his curtain call, you can bet that he'll be greeted by the tell-tale low groan of panto-booing. It makes no sense.

It's not as if panto-boosing is limited to England. It happened to me once in Amsterdam and it's common enough in America where very few people have even heard of panto (except possibly as some patented device for keeping the crease in your trousers: 'Pant-O! For pants that really get the job done!') and those few that have, think it's just plain weird.

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I was peeved to hear that just the other day, at the first night of Glyndebourne's *Billy Budd*, mixed in with the rousing cheers for Brindley Sherratt there were some panto-boos, aimed entirely at his character, the villainous Claggart. It turns out that I was more peeved than Brin, who said he didn't mind; though it should also be remembered that Brin is a genial bass and not a neurotic tenor, psyches as far removed as the Dalai Lama and Norman Tebbit, so this may be a considerable factor in his attitude. Likewise another great British bass, Clive Bayley, defends the right of an audience to react in any way it likes, and rather enjoys being panto-boosed as Claggart.

But none of that makes any difference. It still doesn't explain why audiences show a completely different level of respect in the theatre than they do in the (supposedly) more refined opera house; why the gloves are resolutely on in the one yet the fists are freely exposed in the other. It's one of those baffling mysteries. Like Justin Bieber. Or why anyone would put pineapple on a pizza.

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