

Inside Out I'll have what he's having



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Tenor Christopher Gillett thinks it's time to talk about the birds and the bees and the long tradition of bodice-ripping opera.



We've been together, Sinfini, you and I, for almost a year now. It's really about time we talked about sex.

If you were raised, as I was, on a diet of Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin*, your mind was probably engraved with the idea that opera singers are all like the diva Bianca Castafiore - large, batty, very loud, doomed to sing nothing but the Jewel Song from Gounod's *Faust*, and as sexually appealing as a tin of pilchards. Not only that, in a film, perhaps, whenever there was a bit of opera, physical contact between two singers - assuming there was any at all and they're weren't just bellowing sweet nothings across a vast and empty stage - was usually depicted as if lovers in opera don't so much as embrace as arm-wrestle at a safe distance, while wearing massive costumes and even more massive wigs. Well, it isn't like that.

Oh, OK, it's sometimes like that, in the sort of opera that a lot of people think is the only sort of opera - that is, most of the stuff that was written in the staggeringly prudish 19th century.

Opera is absolutely stuffed with sex

Step either side of the 19th century and opera is absolutely stuffed with sex. One of the very first operas, Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*, is heaving with it, Mozart's Da Ponte operas (*Don Giovanni*, *Figaro* and *Così*) are about little else and even Verdi hinted at it by writing an opera (albeit rather coyly in my opinion), *La traviata*, about a high-class call-girl. Seventy years later, once the 20th century turned up and Victorian sensibilities had waned, it was back to rumpy-pumpy around the clock. If you don't believe me, take a look at half of the operas by Richard Strauss.

I've never had to be totally naked, which is a blessing for all concerned

In my first ever opera role - Nero in *The Coronation of Poppea* at the tender age of 19 - I was half-naked, thrashing around in bed with a half-naked soprano. I'm still at it, in a new opera - *A Harlot's Progress* by Iain Bell and Peter Ackroyd - which I'm rehearsing in Vienna, in which I have a full sex scene with furious, orchestrated humping topped by an impressive orgasm (though I say it myself, who probably shouldn't). In the 36 years since Nero, I've cross-dressed, been gay, bisexual and incestuous, played paedophiles and perverts, danced around the stage with a sex doll, watched writhing strippers, and (as readers of my book *Who's My Bottom?* will be all too aware) I've had sex with a soprano via the rear end of a horse. Amazingly, I've never had to be totally naked, which is a blessing for all concerned.

Tintin's creator, Hergé, hated opera. If he knew what it was really like, Bianca Castafiore would have been chasing Captain Haddock around the piano, dressed only in fishnet stockings and wielding a whip. Now there's a comic book for boys that would fly off the shelves.

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