

Christopher Gillett | 22 October 2013

Inside Out **Life is but a stream**



(c) Sergey Novikov

He's no technophobe, but Christopher Gillett balks at being streamed for free to people watching iPads at breakfast while he's singing his socks off for audiences in Vienna



When I started out as a professional singer in the late 1970s, technology played a very small part in my life. At the risk of coming across as a fuddy-duddy (and let's face it by even using that word I could be nailing my colours to the mast), the only fancy equipment a singer craved back then was an answering machine, and even that was pretty damned cutting-edge. If you had an answering machine you were one step ahead of the pack. Now we all have the internet.

A few days ago, as my wife and I sat guzzling cake in Vienna's delightfully retro Café Prückel, a couple nearby tapped at their laptops and fiddled with their smartphones. Perhaps I was set off by the faded decor - about the same age as me, I reckon - but I postulated to my ever-patient Mrs whether it would be possible for a singer these days to eschew the internet altogether. The answer was, of course, 'no'.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no Luddite. I'm a complete and utter social-media tart. I spend hours on the internet every day. I understand entirely its place in the modern world. I would hardly be writing this if I didn't. But now there's a whole new thing the internet has dumped upon the jobbing singer: live streaming.

Last week I was visited in my dressing room by someone from the Theater an der Wien's management. She clutched a contract to live stream one of our performances of *A Harlot's Progress*, and for various possible spin-offs like a DVD. This might all seem terribly exciting and financially rewarding but there's actually no extra fee for this particular live stream, so we can nip any idea of massive financial gain in the bud, thank you very much. While I'm mostly thrilled that our show can reach a wider audience and people who can't make it to Vienna can see our work in some shape or form, I do have moments - as I did while spooning Café Prückel's Strudel mit Vanillesoße into my capacious gob - when I would like to set the clock back to a fuddier-duddier age.

Who am I performing for? The people in the stalls in Vienna or some opera fans in California who are still eating breakfast while watching the show on an iPad?

I like to think of a simpler time when a troupe of singers descended upon, say, some small Italian town and played *Le nozze di Figaro* to a local audience. Eight hundred punters and a dog or two. No tweeters, bloggers or online critics from whose every word thousands of worldwide opera enthusiasts draw their own conclusions to be further disseminated over the web; just a group of people who have bought a ticket and showed up, hungry for entertainment, thirsty for great music, and filled with the yearning to be transported into a different, alternative world for a few hours. Back then, the show was done purely for the people inside the theatre. Back then, the only people you had to 'sell' your performance to were the paying punters. These days nearly every opera I do comes with a media package attached. I can barely remember the last opera I did where the stage wasn't bristling with microphones and TV cameras. And who am I performing for? The people in the stalls in Vienna or some opera fans in California who are still eating breakfast while watching the show on an iPad?

I understand exactly why live streaming is becoming all the rage. In an age when we have to spend more and more of our time as artists marketing ourselves, dare I say it branding ourselves (ugh), anyone who doesn't keep up with the latest media trends runs the risk of falling off the map. As people sit at home in front of their computers watching our live stream, they will be unfettered by the usual constraints of an opera house. They can eat, drink and chat. They don't even have to listen that hard or stay to the end. Above all they can open their Twitter accounts and give a running commentary on our performance. They can spread the word. All over the world.

Now if that doesn't make me want to jump on a rattling old tram back to the fading Café Prückel and order a huge slab of good old-fashioned *Sachertorte* I don't know what does.

A Harlot's Progress will be live streamed on 24 October at 7pm CET, 6pm in the UK, on the [Theater an der Wien](http://www.theater-wien.at/index.php/en/programme/production/123440) (<http://www.theater-wien.at/index.php/en/programme/production/123440>) website.

Christopher Gillett's account of an operatic tenor's life on the road, *Scraping the Bottom*, has just been published.

[christophergillett.co.uk](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm) (<http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm>)

saddoabroad.blogspot.com (<http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/>)

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