

Inside Out Remembering Sir Colin Davis



(c) Matt Stuart

Tenor Christopher Gillett sang under the baton of the late Sir Colin Davis on two occasions, the second time just three years ago. He remembers him as an inspiring musician, a great conductor and a benevolent presence.



I worked with [Colin Davis \(/uk/learn/artists/colin-davis\)](#) just twice, first in *Peter Grimes* with the [LSO \(/uk/learn/artists/london-symphony-orchestra\)](#) and second in *The Marriage of Figaro* at Covent Garden, the latter just three years ago, when he was 82.

Like any musician of my generation, I grew up listening to many Davis recordings, be they of [Mozart \(/uk/learn/composers/wolfgang-amadeus-mozart\)](#), [Berlioz \(/uk/learn/composers/hector-berlioz\)](#) or [Tippett \(/uk/learn/composers/michael-tippett\)](#) (his brilliant recording of *The Midsummer Marriage* bringing on something of an epiphany), so when I finally got to meet him, at our first *Grimes* piano rehearsal, I was utterly terrified. He once had a reputation for fierceness and hot-headedness (not my favourite attributes) but here instead was a beaming, white-haired gent, softly-spoken and self-deprecating. Problems made him giggle rather than fly off the handle. When things went wrong, this didn't lead to soul-searching and recriminations; mistakes to Colin Davis seemed to be a natural function of the human condition. What mattered wasn't what had just happened, but what would happen next. And what mattered above everything was the music.

Underlying this was the sense that we were communing with something mysterious and wonderful, greater than the sum of all our parts

It seems to me that truly great conductors share the same goal: to get out of the way, to be a conduit rather than a director, to be a conductor only in the same way that copper conducts electricity. Colin Davis was the epitome of this and seemed bemused by the fuss that was made of him. Sometimes, during *Figaro*, he would stop beating altogether or would appear to gesture out of tempo, as if some new impulse, some new voltage had passed through him and he was simply trying to release it. But underlying

this was the wealth of his experience, the confidence we had in him (and he in us) and the sense that we were communing with something mysterious and wonderful, something greater than the sum of all our parts.

He wasn't chummy or matey – I don't know if he ever learned my name but with the vast number of singers he had worked with, who can blame him? – but he glowed with bonhomie, his face almost permanently creased with a smile. The LSO adored him and his rehearsals were filled with laughter.

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During the run of *Figaro* at Covent Garden, I was sitting in my dressing room during Act 1 when I heard a commotion in the corridor outside. I went and had a look, to see David Syrus, the head of music, running towards the stairs while putting on a bow tie. At the end of the act Colin Davis left the pit and David replaced him for the rest of the show. There had been rumours that Sir Colin's wife Shamsi was unwell, though nothing official had been said and he certainly had kept it to himself. During Act 1 he'd received a message that she was critically ill and he rushed home to be with her. She died that night. The opera house contacted the cast to say that Sir Colin wanted to conduct the next performance, three days later. Erwin Schrott, our Figaro, organised flowers from us all and we did our best to console Sir Colin through our music-making. I can't presume to know what was going on in his head and his heart. My guess is that of all the places he wanted to be, cushioned in Mozart's life-affirming score was a better place than many.

[christophergillett.co.uk \(http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm\)](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm)
[saddoabroad.blogspot.com \(http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/\)](http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/)