

Inside Out **Retiring from the operatic stage**



Tenor Christopher Gillett recently celebrated a birthday, which has led him to muse on the subject of how, when, and indeed if, a professional singer approaches the delicate subject of when to call it a day.

I turned 55 last week and while that's no great milestone, it did have me rummaging through my pension policies and pondering how many more years I've got left in the singing game. There's no obvious reason why I couldn't squeeze another 20 years out of my tonsils but if truth be told, it's not necessarily down to me.

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For a lot of singers the phone simply stops ringing well before they're prepared to call it a day. Others soldier on, the performing bug so powerful, their ambition so undented that they really don't know when to stop. Some even announce their retirement and give loads of positively-final-appearances, only to be lured back on stage for a few comeback performances or two. Or three. Or, ooh, for that fee, four! 'I tried to retire but they keep asking me back!' is the somewhat immodest refrain.

Singers, especially in their early years, spend huge amounts of their life struggling to get a career going and to keep it alive; it's something over which we actually have very little control, so much being governed by luck and the whims of others. Yet, oddly, given that the desire for control is something that figures so strongly in any singer's psyche, retirement - the one thing we really can control - is also the thing that few of us ever want to talk about.

Rather than face the inevitability of getting older, some singers choose to reach for the hair dye and lie about their age. Google and high definition video have probably made the reinvention of one's birth date a tricky practice these days but it used to be common, especially amongst lyric tenors and sopranos. To be

fair, in big opera houses it isn't always easy to tell a singer's age, even from the stalls. A large auditorium will knock a good 10 years off a tenor's years and given he might have brought his birthday closer by another five or so, someone my age can be passing himself as a lithe and lissom 40-year-old.

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Personally I'm happy to have acquired a few grey hairs and wrinkles. Having played a plethora of teenagers and girls over the years, and before that, white-haired old men, it makes a refreshing change to play my actual age (and my sex for that matter). Besides, if luck is on my side, I can press many more years yet out of singing the slimy old gits that have now become my stock-in-trade. You never know, it might even stop me reaching for my pension policies for a while longer.

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