

Inside Out **Singing competitions**



Tenor Christopher Gillett's unexpurgated view of life on, off, behind and under the stage.



The tenor is delighted and uplifted by the enthusiasm of young participants in a singing competition

I've spent a few decades as a singer and a lot of that time has been spent under the hot gaze of scrutiny. Your early years are spent being constantly examined and auditioned by the zoo-keepers of the musical world before they feel ready to release you into the wild. Eventually you are considered 'big game' and you become the delicious, juicy target for all kinds of dangerous predators, all too ready to rip the very flesh from your body. I'm not complaining. It's what we signed up for.

Somehow I've managed to keep all my limbs and emerge to the other side, the side where you find yourself peering down the telescopic sights and examining a younger generation of singers. For these days I find myself judging young singers and doing it for a living. Well, for a tiny bit of a modest living. I seem to have become A Member Of The Establishment and it's very strange. Often it is hugely uplifting; like yesterday, for instance.

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I was at Oakham School to co-judge their annual English Song Competition. A staggering ONE HUNDRED children, aged from 10 to 18, took part, each of them performing from memory. And they weren't singing show tunes or anything like that. These were proper classical songs from Quilter, Vaughan Williams, Rodney Bennett, Butterworth, Finzi... the list was huge and there were barely any songs I heard more than once.

At the junior end there were little girls squirming with nerves (been there, done that) and boys bursting into puberty at such a speed you could hear their bones growing and their voices breaking. One girl wriggled around so much that I feared she was signalling that she was about to have an accident. The

seniors showed amazing insight and control. The overall winner was simply extraordinary.

Of course, most of the voices are barely formed but we weren't really there to evaluate vocal technique but to judge the singing of songs, and these are two different things. Amongst all the hey nonny noes and boughs hung with blooms there were startling moments of music-making and story-telling. I can't think of anything more pleasing than to hear a young singer get a song. It was marvellous and the day passed in a flash.

There's hope in them thar hills. There really is.

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

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