

Montserrat Caballé and opera's cash culture



As veteran opera diva Montserrat Caballé is handed a heavy fine for tax evasion, Christopher Gillett looks back on the historic cash culture that has driven more than a few professional musicians to slightly dodgy accounting practices.



The news that the 81-year-old diva Montserrat Caballé has been handed a suspended jail sentence and a €240,000 fine for tax evasion doesn't come as any great surprise. I'm not saying she's particularly mendacious; I think she lived through a time when top-earning opera singers were offered many creative ways of keeping their earnings out of the taxman's gaze, and some naughty habits got out of control.

Pavarotti, too, got into hot water over his claim to be a Monte Carlo resident when he was actually tucking into his spaghetti in Modena. His trial exposed the well-oiled practice of handing out thick wedges of undeclared 'expenses' in brown envelopes. For generations of singers, particularly in Europe, cash was the only acceptable method of payment. You didn't sing the second half of the show until your fee was in your sweaty hand.

In Paris, I was once handed a large concert fee in crisp francs during the interval and had to hide it above a ceiling tile in my dressing room while I went on to sing the second half. Italy used to allow travellers to take only very small amounts of lire out of the country. This posed a problem for the professional singer. You couldn't trust the fixer to wire you your fee (I lost two fees that way); the only way you could take cash home was by hiding it in your socks. It's hardly surprising that some singers turned a bit dodgy.

Thanks to these high-profile trials, there has been a clamp-down on cash. In Italy, it is now against the law to pay cash at all, even for reimbursing travel expenses, which has made life harder still for the jobbing singer. Whereas you used to be able to get some of your fee in cash to pay for your digs and living expenses, now you simply can't. And as many landlords demand the rent in cash, you find yourself making countless visits to cashpoint machines, emptying your bank account back home to fund the job for which you are yet to be paid. The only plus side is that it stops you blowing your fee before you've earned it.

Rehearsing at Covent Garden during the 1980s, I can well remember the company manager showing up most days to hand a famous Italian diva a thick envelope containing a cash advance on her fee, which the soprano would rapidly empty in London's smartest boutiques. 'Bye-bye! I go shopping!' she would trill as the rehearsal ended.

Caballé, I'm told, used to miss rehearsals at Covent Garden because she 'had to go to the dentist', omitting to mention that her dentist was in Barcelona. She was also responsible for a much-used catchphrase that was popular at the Royal Opera at the time, 'I go back to Barcelona!', exclaimed in a Catalan accent when anyone was feeling exasperated or just a little bored. It had sprung from the time when she was to sing Violetta in the famous Visconti black and white production of *La traviata*.

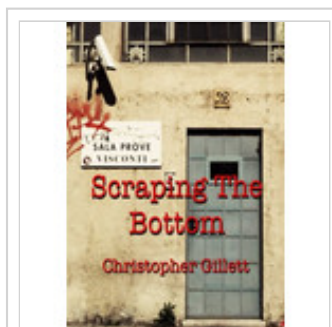
Despite being told repeatedly that Violetta's monochrome costumes, designed with Aubrey Beardsley in mind, were key to the concept, Caballé said she was going to wear her own, brightly-coloured frocks. When the management insisted on the black-and-white dresses, Caballé took a breath and responded with a coy smile: 'I go back to Barcelona!'

It's a phrase that I've uttered many times in my career but, sadly, only ever in jest.

[Read more of Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\).](#)

The tenor's own blog is **christophergillett.co.uk** (<http://christophergillett.co.uk/>)

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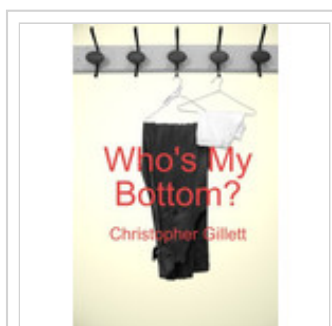
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