

## Opera bosses **How musical should they be?**



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How many opera bosses could recognise an excerpt from *Madama Butterfly*?

Christopher Gillett wonders why business professionals, not musicians, are running some of the world's greatest opera institutions.



Utter incredulity was the reaction of the day when a YouTube video showed Stéphane Lissner, artistic director of the Paris Opera, unable to identify some of the most popular operas in the repertoire – *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* included.



But was the reaction of those who had viewed it truly incredulity – or was it, perhaps, resignation? I'm sure there are plenty more opera bosses who would have been equally stumped. I know I would have been too, had the questioner strayed into certain corners of the canon.

I think the surprising thing is that we expect the people who lead opera companies to have a background in opera, when experience should surely have taught us by now that this is rarely the case.

Sure, some of them will have worked in opera houses for quite a while, learning the ropes on their way up the greasy pole. But I bet I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of opera directors who are musicians in any shape or form. I've certainly met very few who can actually read a score.

Perhaps that isn't an absolute necessity. But then again, I wouldn't dream of applying to captain a cricket team because, the last time I checked, I had absolutely no cricketing skills whatsoever beyond shouting 'Oh, well played!' from time to time.

It would be reassuring to know that the people who hire and fire you have at least some basic skills in your area of work, rather than garnering everything they know from CD booklets and PR handouts.

### **It was like reading Tolstoy with a toddler**

I've had first-hand experience of this. A casting director, now an intendant, had doubts that I might be suitable for a modern piece because he'd been told it was written for a [Rossini](#) ([/uk/learn/composers/gioachino-rossini](#)) tenor. I suggested we have a look at the score together – which was like reading Tolstoy with a toddler – and, surprise surprise, it revealed that the role was about as Rossinian as a bag of tadpoles.

Off the top of my head, I can count among prominent opera artistic leaders: a few stage directors, a lawyer, some PR managers, a couple of accountants, some TV executives, an ex-clarinettist, several ex-administrators and a record executive. There's one working singer, two ex-singers and a conductor. That's all.

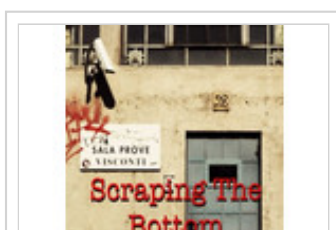
And I don't expect this to change any time soon, if ever. I'm sure someone can come up with myriad reasons why artistic policy is in the hands of so many non-artists. I'm not even trying to say that opera houses *shouldn't* be run by people who are good at accountancy, wearing suits and staying in good hotels on expenses.

But before anybody insists it *has* to be this way, I would point out that, by contrast, straight theatres are almost exclusively run by practitioners of the art form: actors and directors.

So there.

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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