

Opera postgrad training: **Overpriced/unnecessary?**



More opera singers than ever face years of postgraduate education at sky-high costs. Image © Susan Chiang

When Christopher Gillett started out as a singer, his education came free (courtesy of a Government grant) and lessons were arranged at his discretion. Yet aspiring young opera singers these days can face up to a decade of postgraduate education (with a correspondingly eye-watering pricetag). Who, exactly, is winning, asks Chris – apart from the conservatoires?



A couple of years ago, I was at one of London's conservatoires adjudicating some singers as an external examiner: helping to decide whether they had cut the mustard for their diplomas and degrees, and to what extent – from a simple 'Colman's Extra Mild' Pass up to an 'Extra Spicy Meaux With Added Horseradish' Distinction.

One Japanese soprano wasn't very good. Having her parents (who had apparently flown in from Tokyo for the occasion) among the tiny audience clearly didn't help her nerves, but even allowing for that, her technique was poor and her command of languages inadequate. We gave her a scraped Pass, but I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to her next. I had no doubt that she couldn't make it as a professional singer: she simply wasn't good enough, even for chorus work. So what had we just done? Given her some recognition for the work she had accomplished, or false hope for what her expectations could now be?

Around the same time, I got an email from a complete stranger, a soprano on the Isle of Wight, asking if I could give her some tips for 'making it' as a singer. Her email was long and in it she railed against the unfairness of it all, fuming that Katherine Jenkins was earning millions while she, with her singing diploma (she didn't say from where), was reduced to busking in Newport. I had little advice to give.

It is now normal for wannabe opera singers to spend nine years in higher education

There's no doubt about it: more and more youngsters are training to be opera singers. What is truly remarkable is that they are undeterred by the ever-shrinking number of opportunities that await them once they are trained, or the sheer length of the training process itself and its absolutely astonishing cost. It is now pretty-well normal for a wannabe opera singer to spend nine years – yes, NINE – in higher education. That's four years as an undergraduate (now £9,000 a year in fees), two as a postgrad (about £10,000 per annum), another two on one of the conservatoire's opera courses (just under £24,000) and possibly yet another at the National Opera Studio (hopefully covered by a scholarship). That's over £80,000 (\$122,000) in fees alone. After that, some will spend even longer on [a young artists' programme, such as the Jette-Parker at the Royal Opera House \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/the-trouble-with-young-artists-programmes\)](#).

For non-EU students like the Japanese soprano, the cost is staggering – roughly double. At the risk of sounding cynical, it is no surprise that conservatoires are reluctant to refuse diplomas to inadequate foreign singers, given the revenue those singers bring in. It is also no wonder that the singing profession is becoming increasingly gentrified, given its price-tag. You can become a lawyer in less than eight years – it probably costs less, and you have an infinitely greater prospect of earning a living when you're done. And you get to meet some dodgy criminals to boot. What do singers get landed with? Dodgy conductors.

Are students getting their money's worth? I really hope so. A long time ago, when I turned up at conservatoire for my first year as a post-graduate, I was handed my timetable. It said: 'one singing lesson a week, to be arranged privately.' I was on a good-old grant (those were the days!) but had I been shelling out £9,000 on a student loan, I would have thought one lesson a week to be poor value for money.

Opera students are now seen as cash cows

In America, the training programmes seem to go on even longer. So long, in fact, that I can't help but think that opera students are now seen as cash cows, good for many years of milking. Is the same happening in Britain? Let's hope not, but there are worrying signs, and I (and many singers I talk to) can't help but think it's getting a bit too much. I certainly doubt I'd bother to start out again under the new regime.

Now comes the bit where I tell you what would happen if I ruled the world. It's very simple, of course, but it will never happen. I'd scrap all the opera programmes and just have lots of small-scale opera companies instead, and thus lots of opportunities for singers to go out and perform and grow on stage, in small venues, on tour, five days a week. I learned heaps more in ten weeks of touring with Opera 80 (now English Touring Opera) than I ever did in classes, and I'm sure it's true of any singer. Yes, keep up the singing lessons, but for the rest? I'm all for doing it, rather than being told how to do it. How would it be paid for? I have no idea. Public funding? Ha!

Of course, there's a downside to the Gillett Master Plan. A lot of the tired old farts like me who make a modest living dispensing nuggets of hard-won wisdom – teaching at conservatoires and universities, giving masterclasses and other dubious instruments of learning – might have to look elsewhere for ways to postpone digging into their pensions.

I suppose there might still be some adjudication work going, but I'd guess my chances of that are now looking a tad slim.

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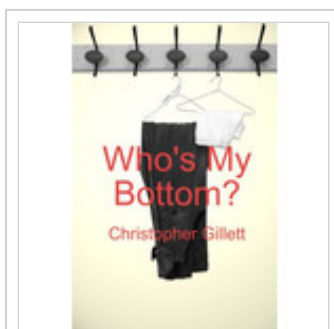
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Read more of Christopher's musings on his blog, christophergillett.co.uk ([http://christophergillett.co.uk/](http://christophergillett.co.uk)).

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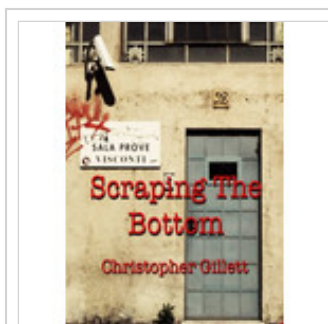
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