

## Opera: **Assessing talent**



Christopher Gillett (left) aged 26 in a production of *The Gondoliers* at Sadler's Wells

While the casting couch may not be commonplace in opera, sexism and sexual harassment in the classical music industry works in complex and mysterious ways, says tenor Christopher Gillett – who can never be sure how much of his early career success came down to being rather easy on the eye...



I recently made a shocking discovery: I was once a pretty young man. I didn't think I was at the time. I thought I was scrawny and spotty, with receding hair. I certainly had no confidence about my appearance. But, it turns out – and I have heard this from a reliable source, i.e. a gay friend of many years' acquaintance – that in some quarters I was considered to be quite the English toffee in the eye candy department.

On the one hand I find this very funny. On the other, I now find myself wondering how much of my early rise to the giddy heights of the second floor can be attributed to someone taking a fancy to me, rather than through any talent I thought I had. I guess I'll never know, but it won't stop me wondering which jobs I got because a casting director or producer enjoyed the pertness of my bum.

Now that the bum is saggy, the hair is grey and sparse, and there's a wobbly, wrinkly flap of flesh where my chin used to be, I can be 100 per cent sure I don't have to worry about this any more – but I appreciate that there are a lot of musicians who do. Only the other day I heard of a handsome young baritone to whom it was suggested that the opening of his shirt might help the panel assess whether he was suitable for a role. The man was a good singer, but far from ready to fill the roles that some producers breathlessly talk about, distracted no doubt by his good looks. It certainly won't be long before he has been added to the rest of the beefcake on parade on the [Barihunks website](http://barihunks.blogspot.co.uk/) (<http://barihunks.blogspot.co.uk/>), where body worship is shamelessly celebrated and where the wearing of a shirt seems to be anathema.

## Sexual harassment in classical music works in complex and mysterious ways

So, does sexual harassment rear its ugly head in the classical music business? Almost certainly, but in complex and mysterious ways. We work in the entertainment industry, for heaven's sake: about as bipolar a bunch as it's possible to find when it comes to issues around appearance and how we should behave. Only the other day, a bass friend pondered on Facebook whether the throwing of knickers at a singer (as happened to Jonas Kaufmann at the Last Night Of The Proms (below, from 4'37) would have been found acceptable if the singer were a young woman and the adoring fans, men of a far superior age. The debate that followed became heated. The whole episode was probably staged anyway, which makes it even more confusing and contentious.



I don't think the casting couch is commonplace in opera. Though I did hear of an ambitious soprano who offered sexual favours to the boss of an Italian house in return for a role, only to be told that he was gay. She reached for her wallet and a large bribe: 'I also come from one of the richest families in Italy!'

**People assume 'the only reason so-and-so has a career is because s/he slept with the boss'**

I've also heard of a boss who made it subtly clear that a bit of hankypanky would pave the way to some tasty roles, without exactly saying it. Apart from the fact that this is simply unacceptable, the other serious side effect is the assumption that tends to be made by the rest of the industry: 'the only reason so-and-so has a career is because s/he slept with the boss'. A few singers spring to mind in this category, not least Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, of whom it was said that, during World War Two and the Allied occupation of Vienna, she could be seen on the arm of whichever general happened to be in charge at the time. That she later married the head of EMI, Walter Legge, didn't do her career any harm. See? It's so easy to draw conclusions which may not be true.

So, pity the good-looking singer. They may actively play the sex-bomb, as some undoubtedly do, but they will always be dogged by a nagging doubt about their real ability. Not Schwarzkopf, mind you: I hear she was an awful person, completely vain and lacking in self-doubt. Whoops, there I go again.

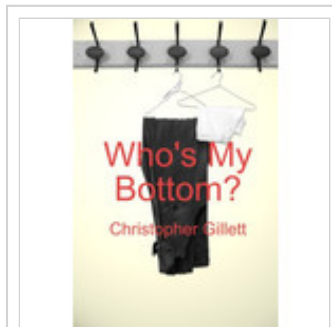
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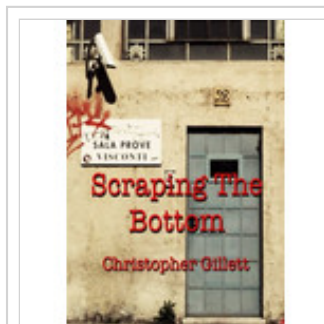
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