

Opera's celebrity culture **Not another Carmen...**



Donizetti's *Poliuto* at Glyndebourne © Tristram Kenton

How many productions of *Carmen* have you seen? How many *Magic Flutes*? Split from the crowd and explore more obscure repertoire – you might find something you like, says Christopher Gillett, who'll be first in the queue for a production of Donizetti's unfairly neglected *Emilia Di Liverpool*.



When I'm wandering around art galleries – something we travelling singers do a lot – there's a thing I try to make myself do: I make a point of spending more time looking at pictures by less famous painters than the ones everyone knows about.

For one thing, it's a good way of avoiding people who treat pictures like celebrities and pose for selfies with them – don't get me started on those people – and it also means I can avoid paintings by Renoir. I can't get on with Renoir. Selfie-takers can happily stand in front of the Renoirs with all the selfie-sticks in China for all I care.

If I never saw another *La traviata* or *Carmen*, I could die happy

Art, like opera, falls victim to a celebrity culture. For people who sell paintings, and operas, this is good news. But certainly in the world of opera, it often means that there are a relatively few big name operas – The Top Twenty, they get called in the States – that get performed an awful lot, and a whole bunch of good operas that don't get seen nearly enough.

Of course, that's not going to change any time soon – but just because an opera isn't famous, it doesn't mean it's not worth hearing. Indeed, if I had my way, some of The Top Twenty would be stuck in a cupboard and rested for a while. If I never saw another *La traviata* or *Carmen*, I could die happy. *The Barber of Seville* too.

Some opera companies go to enormous lengths to avoid popular operas, eschewing them altogether in favour of more obscure works. The Wexford Festival is a case in point. The theatre and film director Nicholas Hytner told me of a conversation he had with a Wexford patron many years ago. The patron asked the director what he had coming up:

'Oh, I'm going to be doing a new production soon of *The Magic Flute* at ENO.'

'*The Magic Flute*? Hmm. Oh yes, Mozart! The same chap who wrote *La Finta Giardiniera*!'

Glyndebourne is doing [Donizetti \(/uk/learn/composers/gaetano-donizetti\)](#)'s *Poliuto* at the moment, and though I don't know it and am not a particular fan of Donizetti, I'm far more drawn to see it than I would be if they were doing his more famous *Lucia di Lammermoor*. There are loads of Donizetti operas that rarely see the light of day – he did write about 70 of the things – and I've always wanted to see *Emilia di Liverpool*, especially because I was always told it has a chorus of mountaineers who spend their days scaling the rugged, alpine landscape around Liverpool.

L'Eremitaggio di Liverpool: Act I Scene 3: N'e? E passata veramente? (...  



I've done my fair share of obscure operas. Grétry's *Le Huron* and Cimarosa's *L'Italiana in Londra* saw the light of day at the Buxton Festival, Salieri's *La Grotta di Trofonio* in Batignano, Italy. They were good fun – some very interesting music and entertaining shows. Arthur Bliss's *The Olympians* (which originally premiered at Covent Garden) for the Chelsea Opera Group had its moments, but that wasn't staged. I'm not sure it ever will be, in my lifetime at least, and I'm not going to lose any sleep about it.

My very first opera, Monteverdi's Coronation of Poppea, had few devotees back in 1978.

I also sang some operas which were obscure when we did them, but which are less so now. Verdi's *Stiffelio* – for which there was no printed score available at the time – has since enjoyed many outings. Not many people knew Handel's *Ariodante* when we did it in Buxton in 1986, and I remember thinking it should be as commonplace as *Così fan tutte*. Even my very first opera, Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*, had few devotees back in 1978, which seems extraordinary now. (But, then again, singing the same opera in Los Angeles almost 30 years later, it was as novel to Californians as a tub of Marmite.)

To return to the art gallery analogy, I read recently that until Kenneth Clark championed Piero della Francesca in the 1950s, the great Renaissance painter was almost unknown. And look at him now.

So, please, don't think: 'If I haven't heard of it it, it can't be any good.' Take yourself, say, to Opera Holland Park, and see Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre re*, an opera I know nothing about apart from the fact it sounds absolutely fantastic. I bet you'll have a good time.

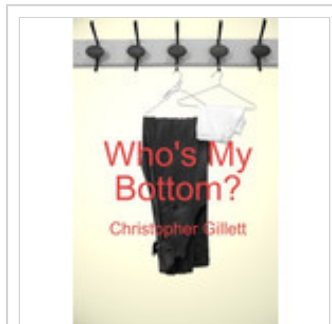
And who knows, you may be able to say to yourself: 'I was there when they rediscovered a masterpiece!'

More from Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music (/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett):

- 'The Exhausted Soprano' vs. 'The Football Tenor': Christopher Gillett on the post-performance opera theatrics of curtain calls (/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/glyndebourne-2015-opera-singer-curtain-call-stereotypes)
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Read more of Christopher's musings on his blog, christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk>)

Recommended



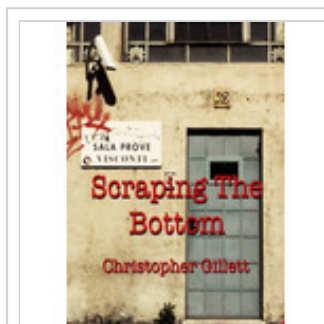
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