

## Pay cuts **Singers lose out**



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Metropolitan Opera boss Peter Gelb has written to principals asking them to give up seven per cent of their fees. Now Welsh National Opera asks singers to part with five. It may not hurt the top stars, but what about the rest, asks Christopher Gillett.



When people hear that big opera stars are being asked voluntarily to drop their fees, I bet their reaction is similar to discovering that a banker has missed out on his bonus. 'Oh boohoo. Poor loves. One less Gucci handbag for them I guess.' And it's hard not to sneer just a little bit when we're talking about the likes of [Domingo \(/uk/learn/artists/placido-domingo\)](#), [Netrebko \(/uk/learn/artists/anna-netrebko\)](#) and [Fleming \(/uk/learn/artists/renee-fleming\)](#), with their massive recording royalties, luxury goods endorsements and arena gig fees, as shining examples of selflessness.

Of course they accepted the cut. At that level it would be a marketing blunder not to. Yes, they stand to lose perhaps \$1,000 per performance, but in their general scheme of things that's pretty small fry. It's the sort of money any of them would drop on a meal for four, or on servicing a car (were it not that stars like these – as with top sportsmen – have their luxury cars provided and maintained for free). I'm not going to lose much sleep over those singers. What they've lost in revenue they've gained in publicity.

I'm more exercised by the effect this cut has on the hundreds of singers who aren't in that league. The 99.9 per cent. [As I demonstrated a few months ago \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-fees\)](#), most singers lead a far from lavish lifestyle, and it is these who are fretting over whether they should hand back a chunk of their wages. There's no PR gain for them. The Met can hardly advertise the names of all the singers who have generously accepted the cut without implicating any who decline.

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The Met has said that the decision any singer makes will not have an impact on future casting decisions, which 'will all be made solely on the basis of our artistic judgement,' which I find a teeny bit disingenuous. Opera companies always cast with a budget in mind and singers operate within a market economy: a market – particularly New York, where the demise of the City Opera has halved the number of opera employers – in which supply far outstrips demand. Singers will now worry that, if it becomes a choice between Singer A who did take the fee cut and Singer B who didn't, Singer A will land the next gig. And if the Met really doesn't mind this time, you can bet that the next fee Singer B will be offered is lower than the one she's getting this season. At least seven per cent lower.

I expect most singers will swallow hard and take the cut, because most singers are nice people who worry about the future of their business. But it will be hard for them. How will the not-so-starry singer pay for the servicing of her car? The car she probably bought second-hand, in which she ferries the kids to school.

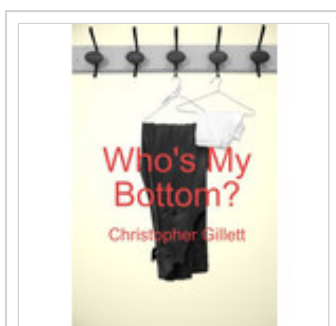
The Met is undoubtedly at the top of the fee tree and, by comparison, a five per cent cut in a Welsh National Opera fee will not be so keenly felt. The maximum anyone is likely to lose is £150 a show. Still, that's a chunk of anyone's personal budget. I've taken big cuts in fees in my time; it has become quite the trend these days for opera companies to plead poverty (even though I can't help noticing their bosses charging around the planet on generous expense accounts), but never after contract. Where the Met leads, other houses are bound to follow, so there could be some unwelcome letters hiding among the Christmas cards this year.

The last time I worked at La Scala they asked if I would mind paying the hefty airfare they were already contracted to pay. Given they didn't make this request to everyone in the cast, I was mightily annoyed and told them I would mind, very much. They paid it, but I haven't worked there since. I don't think those two facts are related but I'll never know for sure.

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

The tenor's own blog is **[christophergillett.co.uk. \(http://christophergillett.co.uk/\)](http://christophergillett.co.uk/)**

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