

## Too Many Messiahs?



Tenor Christopher Gillett has some very specific Christmas problems that most of us don't have to face. Like a seasonal overload of Handel's best-known work, for instance.



**Christopher Gillett considers why too much *Messiah*, too young, can actually be bad for a singer's health.**

It's *Messiah* time of the year and, in churches around the country, elegantly dressed quartets of fresh-faced soloists will spend Saturday nights slowly turning blue with cold while choirs of dubious ability do battle with Handel's famous oratorio. Having sung a gazillion of the things, most of them in the first five years of my career, it's a piece I'll probably never sing again, and frankly I'm relieved. *Messiah* may appear to be a straightforward sing. It lures you into thinking that because of its sheer popularity, but in fact it's a piece that is easy to sing badly. It's a piece you can bluff your way through long before you've properly learned how to sing. It's so difficult to sing really well that I really wish they wouldn't give it to youngsters to sing at all, because I'm not sure it's doing British singing any good.

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When young singers are starting out, the thing they want more than anything, more even than food or sex, is work. Meanwhile, all those impoverished choral societies across the land are after cheap soloists, so they turn to the music conservatoires for help. In my day at the RCM there was a stern lady called Viola Tucker (I'll spare you her nickname) whose job it was to designate which students would be given, say, the Tiddlemouth Choral Society's big Christmas concert for which they were prepared to pay the soloists £10 each, rehearsal on the day, with hospitality or 'hostility' as it was more commonly known, provided.

I actually sang the tenor solos in *Messiah* for the first time, long before my stint at the RCM, at the age of 17, in Milford-on-Sea. James Bowman was the alto soloist. Just 21, I sang *Messiah From Scratch* at the Royal Albert Hall. For that I was paid what I thought was an enormous sum: £60. Though I could get

around the solos all right, I don't suppose I was really any good. In fact it wasn't until my 30s that I set about re-learning how to sing *Messiah*, taking the time I should have given it as a student. Bodging your way through *Messiah* at an early age leads to a lot of bad, lazy habits, habits which stick, and lures many British singers into singing in a way that might get them through low-grade choral society gigs but which will not be much use for anything else. Besides, no-one actually comes to all those *Messiahs* to hear and judge the soloists. They're there for their wives and husbands singing in the choir, for the mulled wine in the interval, and to stand during the Hallelujah Chorus.

I was asked the other day by an opera casting director why I thought America produces so many better-trained voices than we do. There are plenty of reasons, but I think one of them is all those freezing performances of *Messiah* handed out by the likes of Viola Tucker. Just imagine what British singers would be like if every choral society in the land did Verdi's *Requiem* instead. Then we'd really have to pull our socks up.