

Understudies **The worst job in opera?**



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Even if you paid him a small fortune, Christopher Gillett never, ever, wants to be an understudy again. Here he reveals the inside story of the boredom and the balls-ups of always being the bridesmaid...



I've been trying to imagine what it would take to get me to be an understudy again. Some unusual contractual obligations and the words *China, in, tea, the* and *all*, I think. This is not because I'm far too grand to understudy, but because understudying can be so boring, frustrating and humiliating that I simply don't want to do it any more.

Actually, singers don't call it understudying. We call it covering.

Any singers reading this can skip the next bit. They all know how it goes because, bar a very select few, they will have covered at some point in their career. I've done my fair share, covering about 20 roles and 'going on' in five of them.

Not every opera house employs covers but those that do stump up a small fee for the cover to attend, say, the last two weeks of rehearsals, and an equally modest fee to be available on the performance dates. If they're lucky, the covers may get a few rehearsals with an assistant director in a space the size of a spare bedroom.

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Sometimes though – at Glyndebourne for instance – the covers are meticulously rehearsed and prepared. The crucial factor at Glyndebourne is that if the lead singer is ill the cover will certainly get to go on, whereas at houses like the Met and the Royal Opera, the covers for leading roles very rarely go on. The management are more likely to see if any big names are within reach instead, much to the chagrin of the talented local who they've paid not to be singing somewhere else that night.

Covering at the Met, where they pay singers thousands of dollars every night simply to sit in the canteen and be on standby, can be very lucrative, if unsatisfying work. Some people even make a handsome living out of it, though they run the risk of becoming as gloomy as the subterranean canteen itself.

Perhaps the hardest bit about covering is that you have to know your role much better than the person you're covering, simply because they've had the luxury of several weeks of rehearsal in which to get it wrong and correct their mistakes

Of course, the knowing-it-better thing is rarely the case, and I've found myself 'going on' with the terrifying sensation of being unsure as to what exactly comes next, and all in front of a couple of thousand punters.

Damn. I had miscounted and had no idea where I was. Oh well, in for a penny...

In [Berio \(/uk/learn/composers/luciano-berio/\)](/uk/learn/composers/luciano-berio/)'s toe-tapping *Un re in ascolto* at the Royal Opera House, I went on for the last night, a good three weeks after I'd last seen a rehearsal. My big moment came in a fiendishly difficult ensemble, the stage crowded with singers, after a gap of 24 utterly unintelligible bars. The only solution was to count them out like a fiend. So, I counted away under my breath, meanwhile climbing a ladder then descending it again for reasons I can't remember.

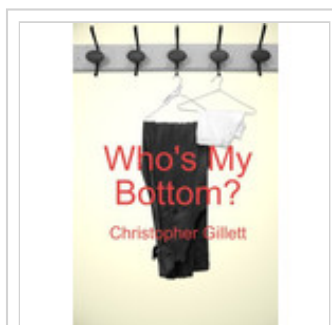
It all seemed to be going pretty well until I got downstage at the end of bar 23 and drew breath, expecting to catch the conductor's downbeat. He was on the third beat of a four bar when I thought he should really be on the first. Damn. I had miscounted and had no idea where I was. Oh well, in for a penny... I wailed my line, 'Calma! Calma!' – how ironic is that? – as confidently and loudly as I could.

It wasn't a total disaster, but whenever I think of it I imagine a tyre bursting on a big lorry, a juddering of brakes, the squeal of tortured rubber, freight flying across a crowded motorway... that sort of thing.

In *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, also at Covent Garden many years ago, I was cast as one of the masters, Moser. We spent a long time rehearsing the very difficult riot scene in which all hell breaks loose and the masters fight with each other. For one performance, a cover was on for the master with whom I was supposed to be exchanging blows. The cover knew where to stand (downstage left, just below the Royal Box) but he clearly didn't know when to sing. So while I hurled abuse at him, his sole response was to silently hop about a bit and look vaguely cross. Come the end of the scene, he hadn't sung a single note. But, to give him his due, he seemed remarkably un-bothered. I guess he was just grateful to have gone on at all.

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/>).

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