

Christopher Gillett | 20 March 2014

Why children shouldn't sing opera

A nine-year old Dutch girl is about to release a CD of operatic arias on Simon Cowell's Syco label. Operatic tenor Christopher Gillett, aged 50+, thinks the whole idea of children singing opera is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Amira Willighagen - new album 2014 - voi che sapete



I'm having one of those days when I'm keeping an eye out for hard surfaces like walls and tables so that I can purposefully and frequently bang my head against them. Why? I've just heard that a nine year-old Dutch girl called Amira Willighagen has recorded an album of opera arias, *Amira*, on Simon Cowell's label Syco. I'd be banging my head if she were 19 years old, but nine? Ridiculous.

She's not the first. Somebody called Jackie Evancho paved the way in America; though when I say she paved the way I really mean that a bunch of adults who should know better saw a way of making a shedload of cash by exploiting a child and did all the actual paving.

At this point I expect the internet trolls will go into a complete meltdown. 'What do you know about it? You sad, mean cynic! You're just envious! Why can't you let a talented child make music that gives so much pleasure to millions?' I'll tell you why. Because when I hear these children sing I hear two kids on the fast track to vocal ruin.

These so-called prodigies are coached by 'vocal experts' who are no doubt happy to enjoy the rewards of being on a successful bandwagon but I'm left wondering how they look at themselves in the mirror of a morning. Hmm, if only I too were some sort of vocal expert, to back up my opinion. [Oh, wait, it turns out I am! \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/judging-competitions\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/judging-competitions) I would say these children have decent enough instruments, but in attempting to mimic women (and men, which is utterly barmy) at least three times their age, they are systematically damaging the delicate, infantile mechanisms in their throats. Given that opera singing is an extreme physical activity, requiring years of training, imagine instead that these children are wannabe weightlifters. Wouldn't the world think it was rather odd if young girls were attempting to lift 100lb dumbbells for the public's entertainment and for someone else's financial gain? Wouldn't the world be appalled? I would hope so.

Let's not confuse this with child prodigies who play instruments, though frankly I can't get too excited about them either. What's the hurry? Why can't children be children? That aside, unlike the singers I've heard, child violinists and pianists tend to know what they're doing. They've been taught properly. A child can't pretend to play a Beethoven sonata in the same way she can mimic someone singing 'Nessun Dorma' (which incidentally Amira is singing on her album, 'with' Luciano Pavarotti).

I feel a particular sense of outrage that this is happening in the name of 'classical music' not because I worry for my chosen field - I don't feel threatened by the cheesy tosh we see on TV talent shows - but because 'classical' gives this dubious enterprise a cloak of respectability. But, as no one will take a blind bit of notice of what an actual classical musician has to say about it, excuse me while I continue my quest for yet more hard surfaces against which to bang my head.

Read more of [Christopher Gillett's opinions on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett\)](#).

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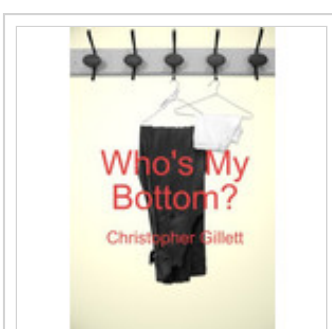
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