

Mozart's tenors: **The good, the bad and the tedious**



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Everyone loves Mozart, don't they? Well, perhaps not everyone. Glenn Gould apparently wasn't much of a fan – and neither are some opera singers, says Christopher Gillett, who takes us on a whistle-stop tour of the composer's most notorious tenor roles. Which character would YOU most like to go to the pub with?



Ten years ago I was working with a brilliantly talented tenor in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. He asked me what I was singing next – it's a terrible, boring habit amongst singers, asking each other what's coming up – and when I said Arbace in Mozart's *Idomeneo* he cringed. 'Ugh. I HATE singing Mozart!' – which was a surprise, as I would have thought he'd be rather good at it. But then again, he was a tenor, and Mozart's tenor roles get decidedly mixed reviews, even among the very best of the species.

Mozart's tenor roles fall loosely into two types, 'lyrical' and 'character'. The lyric tenors get all the nice tunes and are invariably noblemen, the 'star' roles. The character tenors tend to be servants or lackeys, usually comic, and the singers are booked more on their ability to hold the stage than the beauty of their voices. A lot of lyric tenors move on to character roles when they can no longer pass for handsome young princes. Or the beauty of their voice has diminished. Or they've developed a bit of a beer gut.

Many of Mozart's lyric tenors are dreary characters

The trouble is, many of Mozart's lyric tenors are dreary characters – priggish and inclined to a rare brand of dull worthiness. And if there's a more tedious and difficult character trait to play on stage than worthiness, I've yet to meet it. Even weakness is more interesting. I call as my first witnesses the roles of Tamino, Don Ottavio and Belmonte. Young Tamino spends most of *The Magic Flute* telling Papageno –

everyone's favourite character – to shut up, which doesn't earn him many Brownie points. Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*) keeps singing about how cross he is, while doing nothing, and Belmonte in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*... I can't even remember what he does.

Luigi Alva - Don Giovanni - Il mio tesoro



All of these roles require singing of the most exquisite persuasion, and here's the rub: when you're succeeding at singing Mozart, you're making it sound like the easiest thing in the world, despite almost certainly busting a gut to make it sound effortless. But I suppose that's showbiz for you.

Who would you rather go to the pub with – Tamino or Monostatos?

Meanwhile, *The Magic Flute*'s evil Monostatos and Belmonte's sidekick Pedrillo, unburdened by worries about wooing a forlorn princess (or the audience) with the beauty of their singing, are happily stealing the show from their more lyrical colleagues. As the great character tenor Graham Clark pointed out: 'Who would you rather go to the pub with – Tamino or Monostatos?'

Monostatos' aria - Adrian Thompson



Idomeneo is a great role, but Philip Langridge spoiled it for me by being so bloody good at it that to even think of singing it comes with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. *La Clemenza di Tito* is a bit of a Marmite opera, I've always thought – you either love it or you hate it – and I confess to being someone who has never really got it. Sorry.

In memoriam Philip Langridge (1939 - 2010)



Ferrando, in *Così fan tutte*, is something of an enigma. It must be the longest of Mozart's roles – all those ensembles on top of two (or even three) tricky arias. Surprisingly, I loved singing it. It fitted in my happy vocal zone: at the end of three or so hours I used to feel as fresh as a daisy, ready to sing another three hours.

Jonas Kaufmann - *Così fan tutte* - Un'aura amorosa



But the trouble with *Così* is that it's probably more fun to be in than to listen to. It's like playing the finest chamber music: if you're there in the middle of it, it's a joy, but sit the other end of a cavernous opera house and it can lose its charm. And again, if you're doing it well, no-one realises what a marathon it is. A good review for a Ferrando usually reads something like: 'Ferrando and Guglielmo were a nicely-matched pair of soldiers.' That's it. After three or so hours solid of singing. I mean, really.

The Mozart tenor role I would happily sing year in, year out to the end of my days is Basilio in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Not because he has much to do; he doesn't. And I think doing his aria in Act 4 is a terrible mistake – it's dull, self-indulgent and holds up the denouement at a time when the audience's collective bum is becoming very numb.

Le nozze di Figaro ; "In quegli'anni, in cui val poco"



You do, however, get to be in the most sublime opera ever composed. Curzio, who has the luxury of singing in the Act 3 sextet, will also do. But Basilio wins because you can also make people genuinely laugh, and in a Mozart tenor, that's a rare opportunity.

The last time I sang Basilio was in Los Angeles, with Plácido Domingo conducting. He himself had recorded Basilio's aria many years ago for a Mozart disc, which struck me as a curious thing to do, so in the pub after a show I asked him why. 'I was supposed to record one of Tito's arias but I couldn't sing it,' he said. 'So we decided to do Basilio's instead.'

Which rather proves my point – that not all Mozart works for all tenors.

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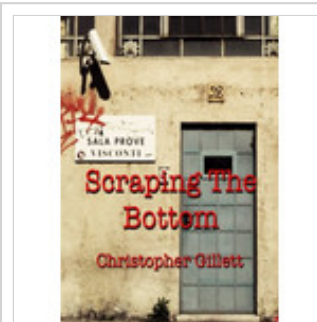


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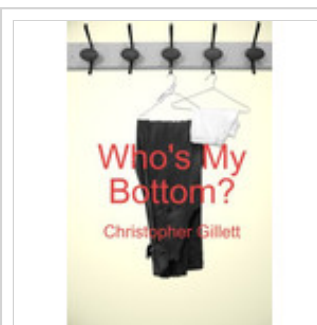
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