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PRE-PERFORMANCE PREP

For some people, opera is a religion. Others think it is considerably more important than that. This makes it a field in which the bluffer must tread with particular delicacy to avoid causing offence, or being exposed as the only sane person in the asylum. The object of this short guide is to impart sufficient knowledge to allow the average reader to pass for someone who 'knows a bit about opera' should the need or urge arise.

WHY DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OPERA?

A fair question. Perhaps because you risk joining those black-tied punters regularly encountered at grand opera houses, whose body language (fidgeting, sighing and repeated consultations of wristwatches) makes it clear that they would rather be undergoing waterboarding.

They might have found themselves in this unfortunate predicament because opera has become an arm of the 'corporate hospitality' industry, along with every major sporting event. And, while it is apparently

true that those with no interest in tennis can pass a perfectly pleasant day at Wimbledon without ever leaving the hospitality suite, you will certainly raise eyebrows at Glyndebourne if you offer to keep an eye on the picnic while everyone else troops off to see the show.

Clearly, those who invite their valued contacts to a night at the opera do so in the belief that they are offering them a treat, not a torture. If, after reading this book, you still feel that opera has nothing to offer, then it will probably be best to try saying a polite 'no' when your next invitation comes along. Either that or prepare yourself by borrowing some exceptionally boring DVDs (steam trains, trolleybuses or boxed sets of *Big Brother* should all do nicely) and practise for your next visit to the opera house by watching them sitting completely still, in perfect silence.

Should you find yourself unable to avoid such an invitation, don't despair. This short but definitive guide will conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in opera discussions and equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that might even allow you to be accepted as an opera lover of rare passion and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between an Austin Allegro and an *allegro con brio*.