

The Gilbert and Sullivan Legacy

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The Gilbert and Sullivan Operas may be the most recognizable and the most enduring of Victorian institutions. A century later, they remain as popular as they were in the first days of the Savoy Theatre and the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Practically, the works of no other librettist or composer from Victorian England are seen or heard today; and, except for the plays of Shakespeare, and possibly those of Bernard Shaw, no other English stage works have been so often performed or are still so often played as the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Gilbert, as much as Dickens, Thackeray, Wilde, Conan Doyle, and Tennyson — and Sullivan, far more than any other composer — represent to us the Victorian times.

Gilbert and Sullivan established themselves at the crossroads of their respective arts. Arthur Sullivan enjoyed a thorough musical education, first in the Chapel Royal and later at the Royal Academy of Music and Leipzig Conservatory. He was the first principal of the National Training School for Music, the antecedent of the present Royal College of Music. He knew many musicians of the generation before his own, including Rossini and Liszt. Sullivan held positions as organist in fashionable churches, wrote a large number of hymns and liturgical works, and was steeped in the traditions of Anglican church music. He edited a series of opera scores for Boosey (then, as now, one of Britain's principal publishers), and was influential in the promotion of international copyright and composers' rights organizations. His songs and orchestra music brought him early popularity that increased on the strength of his choral music. He was the conductor of the London Philharmonic and other orchestras, and for many years he was the musical director of the prestigious Leeds Festival. More than any other musician, he was in close social contact with the Royal family. Sullivan was an extraordinarily businesslike composer who, through talent, hard work, and influential friendships, rose from humble beginnings to fortune and fame, to the extent that his death plunged the nation into mourning. Even if it had not been for the extraordinary Gilbert and Sullivan operas, Sullivan would still be remembered because of his pivotal role in Victorian music and society.

W. S. Gilbert was likewise a central figure in British literary and theatrical circles, though he rose to prominence by a less direct path. He received a liberal education, worked unhappily as a civil servant, studied and practiced law (unsuccessfully, by all accounts), joined the militia as a reserve officer, and began to write and draw as an avocation. His originality, imagination, and craftsmanship were perhaps first appreciated by the proprietor of an upstart humorous weekly called *Fun*, in which his "Bab" Ballads, drawings, and prose contributions became the highest points in a magazine of generally high quality. He found himself among a circle of young, talented literary men, especially the dramatist T. W. Robertson, and took good advantage of early opportunities to write for the popular theater.

Within a decade of his first stage efforts, and well before his first collaboration with Sullivan, Gilbert was widely referred to as the leading British dramatist. A sign of the prestige Gilbert's name conferred is that no fewer than seven London theaters opened with his works. Gilbert held this preëminent position for more than two decades, one of the golden ages of the London stage.

The extraordinary immediate and lasting success of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas must be credited as well to a third figure, the theatrical manager Richard D'Oyly Carte, whose entrepreneurial and managerial talents were largely responsible for the long runs and pecuniary success of the operas. It was in no small measure through Carte's establishing the Savoy Theatre, and forming a permanent company — carefully selected and thoroughly trained by Gilbert and Sullivan themselves — that the London stage experienced a general rise in the level of performance. The practical success of the Savoy operas contributed to an atmosphere that encouraged the most talented authors and composers to direct their attentions to the musical stage.

For the record, William Schwenck Gilbert was born in London on November 18, 1836, and Arthur Seymour Sullivan was born in London on May 13, 1842. They met in the autumn of 1869. Their first collaboration occurred in 1871; the next, four years later. It was not until late 1877 that their series of comic operas commenced, with *The Sorcerer*, unbroken to the end of the run of *The Gondoliers* in 1891. After that time, Gilbert and Sullivan joined together twice more, in 1893 and 1896. Sullivan died in 1900, at the age of 58; Gilbert lived on until 1911, when he drowned — or had a heart attack while swimming — in an effort to aid a young visitor, apparently in distress.

In all, Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on 14 operas. Except for the first, the music to which was lost (some say intentionally destroyed), and the last two, which are performed only occasionally, the entire canon remains very much alive. The following is a résumé of the joint works and their first London productions:

Thespis; or, The Gods Grown Old, Grotesque Opera in 2 acts; Gaiety Theatre, December 26, 1871; 64 performances. *Trial by Jury*, Dramatic Cantata in 1 act; Royalty Theatre, March 25, 1875; 227 performances. *The Sorcerer*, Modern Comic Opera in 2 acts; Opera Comique Theatre, November 17, 1877; 178 performances. *H.M.S. Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved a Sailor*, Nautical Comic Opera in 2 acts; Opera Comique Theatre, May 25, 1878; 571 performances. *The Pirates of Penzance; or, The Slave of Duty*, Comic Opera in 2 acts; Opera Comique Theatre, April 3, 1880; 363 performances. *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride!*, 'sthetic Opera in 2 acts; Opera Comique Theatre, April 23, 1881; 578 performances. *Iolanthe; or, The Peer and the Peri*, Fairy Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, November 25, 1882; 398 performances. *Princess Ida; or, Castle Adamant*, a Respectful Per-Version of Tennyson's "Princess" in 3 acts; Savoy Theatre, January 5, 1884; 246

performances. *The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu*, Japanese Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, March 14, 1885; 672 performances. *Ruddigore; or, The Witch's Curse*, Supernatural Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, January 22, 1887; 288 performances. *The Yeomen of the Guard; or, The Merryman and His Maid*, Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, October 3, 1888; 423 performances. *The Gondoliers; or, The King of Barataria*, Comic Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, December 7, 1889; 554 performances. *Utopia (Limited); or, The Flowers of Progress*, Comic Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, October 7, 1893; 245 performances. *The Grand Duke; or, The Statutory Duel*, Comic Opera in 2 acts; Savoy Theatre, March 7, 1896; 123 performances.

The Savoy operas were born out of the traditions of grand opera, English ballad opera, and European operetta. At the same time, they represent a “most ingenious paradox,” for Gilbert and Sullivan were also reacting against and parodying those same traditions, in effect biting the hands that fed them. But they also brought important developments to the Victorian stage. In their collaboration, the librettist assumed a role as important as that of the composer — some might say more important, since Gilbert’s name was generally (and uniquely) billed before Sullivan’s. The comic opera libretto took on special importance because the plot could be advanced through dialogue, in some situations more efficiently and effectively than through the music. Gilbert and Sullivan reduced the traditional emphasis on ballads and “set pieces” that were irrelevant to the story, but could be excerpted and sung outside the opera; correspondingly, nearly all of the musical numbers were integrated into the plot. Ensemble numbers were increasingly highly developed, and the chorus, rather than serving as bystanders, took on a more prominent participatory function. The Savoy operas were truly unified creations, the composer and dramatist deciding together every aspect of the production, from the scenario and casting to the last detail of musical and dramatic performance. Above all, Gilbert and Sullivan became synonymous with skillful and ingenious craftsmanship.

While it would be wrong to think of Gilbert as essentially a scholarly or didactic writer, it is self-evident that he was well-educated, and (even more importantly) that he had a capacious memory and the facility to summon an astonishing range of images and allusions and to express them with equally astonishing virtuosity. His particular gift was sapience untainted by pedantry.

Gilbert declared himself a writer for the middle classes, one who valued structure and clarity above all other considerations. But the ability to be at once arcane and comprehensible is a rare and special species of sagacity. In Gilbert’s libretti we find scatter-shot insights into art, politics, religion, family, sociology, philosophy, that, taken together, virtually comprise a chronology of his own age and its attitudes. Gilbert’s lyrics and dialogue contain classical, literary, historical, and social allusions which reveal his own education,

and, indirectly, that of his audience: that the Gilbertian jokes — many of which have to be explained to us today — should have been immediately understood by at least a goodly portion of his own audience, attests to the remarkable diversity of interest and knowledge of the educated Victorian. There can be no clearer example than the famous patter-song from *Patience*, of which this is the final verse:

If you want a receipt for this soldier-like paragon,
Get at the wealth of the Czar (if you can) —
The family pride of a Spaniard from Arragon —
Force of Mephisto pronouncing a ban —
A smack of Lord Waterford, reckless and rollicky —
Swagger of Roderick, heading his clan —
The keen penetration of Paddington Pollaky —
Grace of an Odalisque on a divan —

The genius strategic of Caesar or Hannibal —
Skill of Sir Garnet in thrashing a cannibal —
Flavour of Hamlet — the Stranger, a touch of him —
Little of Manfred (but not very much of him) —
Beadle of Burlington — Richardson's show —
Mr. Micawber and Madame Tussaud!
Take of these elements all that is fusible,
Melt them all down in a pipkin or crucible,
Set them to simmer and take off the scum,
And a Heavy Dragoon is the residuum!

The Savoy Operas find their greatest distinction, perhaps, in their peculiar humor. Was it meant to be biting satire, or just good-natured entertainment? It is characteristic of a great humorist (and here I am also referring to Sullivan, who, through his music, could deliver a joke as well as Gilbert could write one) that we can seldom tell where his true feelings lie. Is Gilbert's real alter ego to be found in the jibes and jests of Jack Point's "private buffoon," in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, or rather in the bluff Lieutenant, to whom "that sort of thing would be most irritating"? Was Gilbert a Republican, like his gondoliers Marco and Giuseppe, for whom "all shall equal be," or was he a loyal Royalist, like the Pirates of Penzance, who "with all their faults, they love their Queen." When Sullivan, in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, writes an Act I finale that Verdi could have been proud of, is he poking fun or paying homage? One of the delights of the operas is their omnidirectional humor: as if, like Jack Point, Gilbert and Sullivan were to say, "For look you, there is humour in all things."

Indeed, Sullivan is the more problematic figure. It is because his form of satire is parody almost entirely free of burlesque, and his execution is so masterful in form and technique —

but also because his own training and predilections place him squarely in the mainstream — that it is difficult to know when his recalling of identifiable styles is meant to be satirical and when he is simply dipping into his own repertory of apt and felicitous devices that he had long since assimilated from the great and the commonplace alike.

In any case, we find in Sullivan a thorough understanding, appreciation, and assimilation of the essence of virtually the whole of Western music. We find clear echoes of Weber in *The Sorcerer*; of Verdi in *The Yeomen of the Guard*; of Wagner in *Iolanthe* and *The Grand Duke*; of Bellini in *Trial by Jury*; of Mozart in *H.M.S. Pinafore*; of Mendelssohn in *Iolanthe*; of Handel in *Trial by Jury* and *Princess Ida*; of the Jacobean ayre in *The Pirates of Penzance*; and of bel canto, and especially the forms and clichés of Italian opera, throughout the Savoy repertory. But these are no pale imitations: Sullivan the alchemist has melded the silver of the classics with his own special mercury to form an amalgam of which he holds the patent and the secret recipe.

It is not a simple matter, even at a century's distance, to assess the significance of the Savoyards. Although a few of their operas, most importantly *The Mikado*, achieved some currency outside the English-speaking countries, both Gilbert and Sullivan have understandably had a parochial appeal, and neither had any perceptible effect on the course of theater, music, or opera on the Continent. And although Gilbert and Sullivan have had any number of followers, imitators, revisers, and even parodists, none of these has achieved any lasting fame or contributed to the living repertory.

Perhaps the essential question is, "How might music and theater be different today if there had been no Gilbert or no Sullivan?" Both contributed immeasurably to the general elevation of the standard of composition, production, and performance in the musical theater. They also helped to bring respectability to the stage as a "source of innocent merriment" — as Sullivan once put it, to nail the coffin of the French *opéra comique*. As importantly, Gilbert and Sullivan were responsible to a very large degree for a growth of self-esteem in English theater and English music: it is ironical that the Empire on which the sun never set could only dish up for its entertainment a *rechauffée* of imported plays and operas, presented by imported singers and instrumentalists, or English performers assuming foreign names. Gilbert, Sullivan, and Carte declined to pass off bald translations and adaptations as original works, or to concede the superiority of Italian opera or French operetta. It was because of their success, in large part, that the cause of native English musical theater became attractive at once to the serious opera composer and to the musical comedy songwriter. Just as surely, American opera and musical comedy are as strongly in the Savoyards' debt.

But for all that, the crucial answer to this question is almost self-evident: without Gilbert and Sullivan, the musical theater would be most different in that the world would have been deprived of the entire genre of the Savoy operas themselves. Notwithstanding all that Gilbert and Sullivan contributed to and signified in the operatic tradition, it is their incomparable

and irreplaceable works that are their justification and their memorial.

Quite apart from their merits, the initial popularity of the Savoy operas owed a great deal to the exceptional performance values of D'Oyly Carte's productions: expensive and well-rehearsed, by a strong and stable company, in a day when (even more than our own) those elements could not be taken for granted. Certainly their lasting success has owed much to the modest vocal demands that placed them within the capabilities of amateur organizations, and to the built-in promotion of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, which has devoted itself to that special repertory, and whose virtual monopoly until recently prevented the operas from entering into the professional repertory. Many another worthy opera has languished for the lack of these advantages, rather than from inherent weaknesses. Since the last copyright in the operas expired in 1961, the Savoy operas have begun to enter the general repertory of professional opera companies, where they belong. It is possible once again to see these operas produced — and judged — according to professional artistic standards, rather than as eccentric cult pieces. It is time to celebrate these operas, and the period in which they were nurtured; and to assess them by the same measures with which we have long regarded the masterpieces of earlier times.

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